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AUGUST 1986
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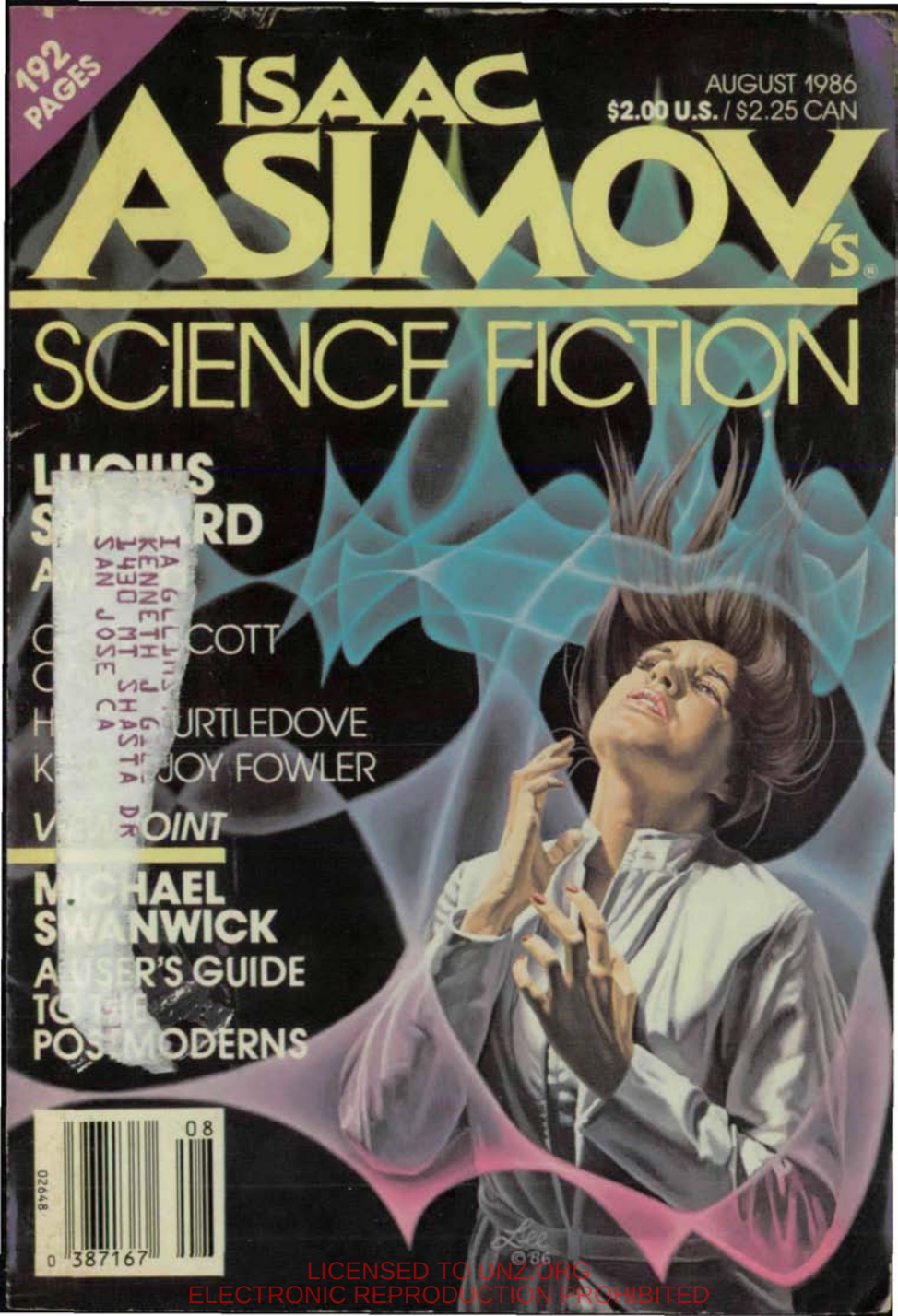

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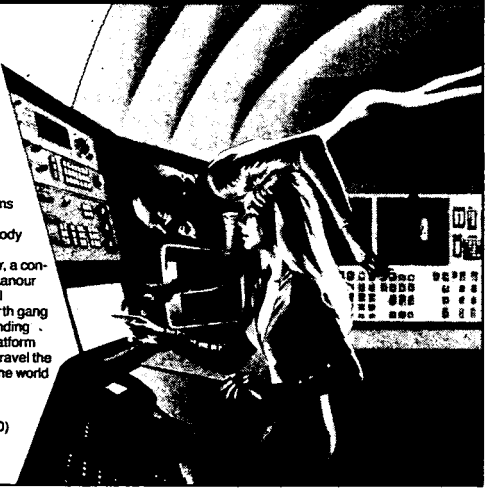

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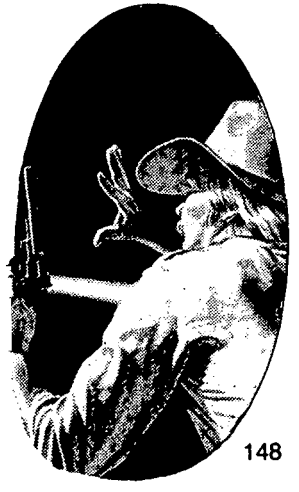

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION®

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EDITORIAL

THE HOLLOW EARTH

by Isaac Asimov

In a way, I am glad that the mail I get still has the capacity to surprise me with its manifold evidences of crackpottery. Just as I am ready to sink back into the sad certainty that I have seen it all, and that nothing more can break life's round of dullness, something astonishing comes along and socks me right in the funny bone.

Let me begin by saying that any number of people are perpetually publishing books at their own expense in which they put up for public gaze their pearls of nitwittery. This, in a way, is good, since it demonstrates our belief in the freedom of speech and press. If, in the name of sanity and good sense, we were to be lured into suppressing these examples of limping lunacy, we would be setting a precedent for quashing the expression of any view that someone or other dislikes and you and I would surely be in trouble.

Of the various examples of published pinheadedness of which I here speak, a sizable fraction seems to reach me, since, for some reason or other, every inventor of such vacuosities is firmly convinced that I am so broadminded, and so open to the unusual, that I would be sure to welcome junk with loud yelps and cries of approval.

Naturally, I don't. I can tell nonsense from sense and distinguish the mad from the unusual. I am not afraid of the merely off-beat, as I showed when I wrote an introduction to "The Jupiter Effect," but I can draw the line.

For instance, I draw the line at all notions that we live on a hollow Earth; that within the curved surface of our globe is a vast cavern with a central radioactive "sun," perhaps, together with an inner surface on which there is a world like our own. This belongs in the same category as does belief in elves, leprechauns, and creationism.

Imagine, then, my astonishment at receiving a little soft-covered book that not only propounds the hollow-Earth belief, but in great huge letters on the cover takes *my* name in vain as another proponent. Within the covers it quotes passages from various books of mine, taken quite out of context, and then interprets them with non-

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sequiturish madness as supporting the hollow Earth.

For a moment, I considered a possible lawsuit, since aspersions were being cast on my competence as a science writer, and I was being damaged in consequence.

Commonsense quickly prevailed, however. The author undoubtedly had no money I could seize and legal expenses would be high. Furthermore, money would in no way compensate for the damage, if there were any; and I wasn't likely, in any case, to demonstrate damage, only hurt feelings, for it was clear, on the face of it, that no rational person could possibly take the monumental lunacy of the book seriously. And then, any legal action would merely publicize this lump of unreason and do the author a favor.

But where did the notion of the hollow earth come from?

To begin with, everyone assumed the Earth was flat, and it was indisputable that caves existed so that there were cavities underground. For the most part caves were unexplored and no one knew how deeply they penetrated. It seemed sensible to suppose that the Earth was a flat slab with as much empty space beneath it as there was above it.

The existence of volcanoes rather indicated that the space beneath was not very comfortable. In the Greek myths, giants who rebelled against Zeus were chained underground and it was their writhings that caused earthquakes, while un-

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derground forges of divine or demonic smiths occasionally overflowed and produced volcanoes.

The Old Testament, in places, seems to preach that good is rewarded and evil is punished right here on Earth, but this didn't hold up. The evidence to the contrary was so overwhelming that even as inspired writ, it couldn't be accepted. It had to be supposed that the rewards and punishments came after death and, being unwitnessed, they could be made all the vaster—infinite bliss for the people you like and infinite torment for the people you dislike. The bliss was in heaven above, and the torment in hell below. Volcanoes made it seem likely that hell was a place of fire and brimstone.

Even after the Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle, demonstrated Earth to be a sphere, that sphere had to be considered hollow, since otherwise there was no place for hell. Dante's detailed description of the Earth had it the hollow spherical center of the Universe with a series of concentric heavens surrounding it and a series of concentric circles of hell within it. The three great traitors, Judas, Brutus, and Cassius (one for God, two for Caesar) were frozen into the ice at Earth's very center.

Thus, the notion of the hollow Earth was made virtually part of religion, and when modern science was born, scientists struggled to make it sensible as well as pious. In 1665, the German scholar and Catholic priest, Athanasius Kircher (a first-class scientist, who speculated on the possibility that newly-discovered microorganisms might be the cause of disease), published "Subterranean World," the most highly-regarded geology text of its time. It described the Earth as riddled with caverns and tunnels in which dragons lived.

Naturally, the thought of another world, just a few miles under the surface on which we live, was infinitely attractive to science fiction writers and, after Kircher's time, there was a steady drumbeat of stories about the Earth's hollow interior. The best of them was Jules Verne's *A Journey to the Center of the Earth,* published in 1864. Verne described underground oceans and dinosaurs and brutish man-apes down there. The most popular hollow-earth stories were, perhaps, those by Edgar Rice Burroughs about "Pellucidar," the name he gave the inner world. The first of those books were published in 1913.

The hollow Earth was by no means left to the domain of science fiction, however. In the 1820s an American named John Cleve Symmes insisted that Earth consisted of a whole series of concentric globes with space between. Furthermore, these inner worlds could be reached by holes that passed through them all and penetrated even the outermost surface on which we live. And where were these holes on our world's surface? Where else but at the North Pole

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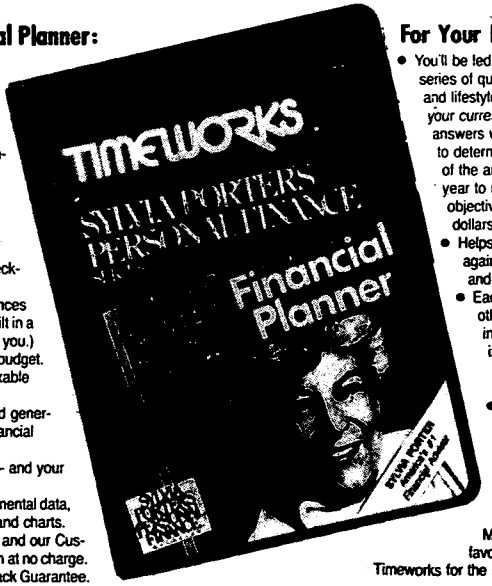

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and South Pole which, in Symmes' time, had not yet been reached and could therefore be safely dealt with?

Symmes presented no real evidence in favor of the hypothesis, but he gathered a group of devotees; the kind that need no evidence, just unsupported statements, and are made the more furiously devoted to nonsense by any attempt to demonstrate its irrational character. They were people of the same sad sort that cling ferociously to the Velikovskys and von Danikens of our own day.

But is it possible that the Earth *is* hollow?

No, it isn't. The evidence showing the Earth to be a thoroughly solid body goes back before Burroughs, before Verne, and before even Symmes. From his first lecture on the subject, Symmes was talking through his hat.

Why? Because in 1798, the English scientist, Henry Cavendish, determined the mass of the Earth, his preliminary figure being almost exactly that given by today's most delicate instruments. This mass showed Earth's average density to be 5.5 grams per cubic centimeter.

The density of the ocean is roughly 1 gram per cubic centimeter, that of the surface rocks at an average of 2.8 grams per cubic centimeter. In order to raise the overall average to 5.5 grams per cubic centimeter, the lower regions of the Earth must be considerably denser than the surface rocks. It is all we can do to account for the overall density of the Earth if we suppose it not only to be solid, but to have an interior core of nickel-iron under pressure. To imagine that the overall density can be reached if the Earth were hollow is simply out of the question.

But that's not all. We can calculate how the temperature and pressure of the rocks must increase with depth, based on observations in mines and on theoretical considerations. These calculations are not precise and somewhat different figures are reached by different scientists, but all the figures agree in this: At a not too considerable distance below the surface, the rocks become hot enough to be plastic under the pressures they are subjected to. In other words, if you suddenly created hollows deep underground, the surrounding rock would be squeezed into those hollows, which would fill up and disappear in short order. Thus, not only is the Earth not hollow, it can't even be made to be hollow.

Finally, seismologists have been studying earthquake waves for years. From the manner in which those waves travel through the Earth, from their speeds, from their changing directions, it is possible to work out many details about the interior—the exact distance underground where hot rock changes into molten metal, for instance. And all the studies agree on one thing—no hollows!

So the hollow-Earth doctrine is a potpourri of poopery, and an inanity of insanity. So say I! ●

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LETTERS

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

I have been reading SF since I was twelve. I am now fifteen and have been a subscriber to the magazine for two years. The editorials are always good, as are the letters, Martin Gardner's puzzles, and "Mooney's Module." I'm not very involved in role-playing games, but I still enjoy the section and the book reviews.

But a magazine is obviously more than that. The stories are what count. I, too, am glad to see action, plot, humor and science, especially the last, replacing weird. Now the only thing lacking is puns. I think that the way you have decided to handle sex, gore, language, etc. (i.e., not rejecting up-front a story that contains these items as long as they are an integral part) is the only reasonable solution. Here's wishing that you and the Good Doctor keep up the great work.

Live long and prosper,

Eric Baugh
Redding, CA

Well, now I wonder what Gardner's attitude on puns are? Here's a chance for our new Chestertonian editor to have his say on that matter. How about it, Gardner?

—Isaac Asimov

I enjoy a good funny story, and have already bought funny stories from R.A. Lafferty, Avram Davidson, Ian Watson, and the Good Doctor himself, among others. I like to think *that I have a sense of humor (as for what* other *people think, Who Knows?). Puns, however, are a verbal spice that must be used very very sparingly, and I'm afraid that the pun story* per se *is just not my cup of meat.*

—Gardner Dozois

Dear Dr. Asimov,

During its Golden Age, Science Fiction was always two steps ahead of the cutting edge of science, treading where research scientists dared not dream about. Your robot novels, Clarke's communication satellites, and Heinlein's intuitive design for mechanical manipulators (Waldoes), not to mention the innumerable authors who have contributed their own personal version of man's first trip to the moon, have all spurred science on to attempting to weave reality from dreams. Unfortunately, it appears that people have stopped dreaming. That is why I was so glad to see "All This and Heaven Too" in the Mid-December issue by James Tiptree, Jr. Besides writing an insightful and engrossing story (which I couldn't put down) he managed

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to include one of my own pet scientific fantasies. Unfortunately (for my taste), he does not take the time to explain it fully and, either in an attempt to save space or due to an oversight in his research, he makes one important mistake which I hope to correct so as not to frustrate those eager research scientists out there eager to synthesize my fantasy into reality.

The inaccurate information occurs early in the story, when Tiptree is outlining transportation in Ecologia-Bella. The idea of hydrogen burning automobiles is a fine one, and I commend him for using it in his "perfect society" scenario because it is a perfect fuel source. The storage of hydrogen as a hydride (hydrogen-metal compound) is indeed a good one, overcoming the problem of storage. The only glaring error is that the product of simply oxidizing this hydrogen with air *is not* water vapor. Because of the tremendous heat in the combustion chamber, not only does the oxygen mix with the hydrogen, but also with the nitrogen, forming a nitrogen oxide: a pollutant even less desirable than carbon monoxide.

This Hydrogen/Air mix in a modified gasoline engine is already a working reality: Peugeot accomplished this with the Peugeot 505, modified by Billings Corp. The hydrogen is stored as a hydride and when heat is applied to this compound it breaks the bond, releasing the hydrogen gas to be used as a fuel. The engine coolant is used to release the hydrogen while the engine is running. (For starting, at thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit the mixture releases enough hydrogen to pressurize the system at twenty pounds per square inch; enough pressure for running the engine until the engine coolant can heat the fuel.) The only way of eliminating the nitrogen oxide emissions is to inject water, lowering the ignition temperature below the temperature required for the nitrogen reaction. This, however, lowers the economy and improvement in the compression ratio versus a regular gasoline engine. Using the Peugeot 505 as a prime example, fuel economy improved twenty to thirty percent. According to Billings Corp., in order to be feasible, the improvement would have to be at least forty to fifty percent.

Peugeot is using a standard engine with modification, so it still takes up the normal amount of space. What Tiptree wanted is a car burning a hydrogen/oxygen mixture with O_2 stored cryogenically. On the face of it, this seems ridiculous: why should you carry around O_2 when free air will serve, especially when you must pay for it in higher operating costs and in space for storage (H/O is 2:1 by volume)?

Now, however, look at the other side. When one pound of hydrogen is produced, eight pounds of oxygen are produced. Also, the O_2 needs only half the space of hydrogen for an equal amount of fuel. The Hydrogen/Air car needs to store twice the volume of hydrogen that the hydrogen/oxygen car needs to store of both hydrogen and oxygen combined because the H/O mixture is allowed to burn hotter, producing more BTU's than the H/Air, thereby necessitating less fuel for an equal distance. The H/O mixture can burn at higher temperatures because

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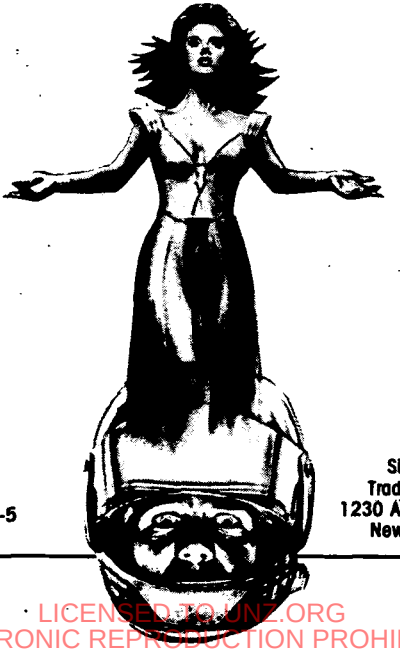

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there is no nitrogen to produce nitrogen oxide, limiting the operating temperature.

The hydrogen/oxygen car will make up for the extra space needed to store cryogenic O_2 because the size and weight of the engine would be reduced to a fraction of the standard V-6 gasoline engine. The H/O car, however, has no emissions; i.e., zero pollution (its only exhaust product is pure water). Also, the H/O car will have no running noises other than tire-noise and air friction.

The H/O car has many drawbacks, such as the dangers of storing and transferring cryogenic O_2, but I am confident that someone out there will be sufficiently goaded by Tiptree's vivid account of Pluvio-Acida into solving these and other problems necessary to making the H/O car a feasible alternative to the archaic gasoline engine.

For further details see:

Escher, Williams J.D. "The Case for the Hydrogen/Oxygen Car," *Analog Science Fact-Reader*. St. Martin's Press, N.Y., 1974.

McElroy, John. "Alternate Fuel Automobiles—the Peugeot 505," *Road and Track*. Nov. 1982.

Sincerely,

John Mantione
112 Holbrook Road
Holbrook, N.Y. 11741

I assure you people have not stopped dreaming. Sometimes the fashions in dreams change, that's all, and science fiction these days seems to be accentuating sociological and psychological dreams rather than strictly technological ones. And that doesn't mean there aren't plenty of technological dreams, too. What's more, the missing of some points is sometimes forgiveable. For instance, have you ever dreamed that James Tiptree, Jr. is a woman? Because she is.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Asimov,

Recently in several of our science classes, as part of their regular assignments, students were asked to read science fiction novels from our school library. As a follow-up in class, students discussed "how the world would be if humans were photosynthetic." As a result, the teacher was asked about writing science fiction stories and the availability of contests for student science fiction writers.

Do you, through your magazine, sponsor such contests? If not, would this be an item to look for in future issues of your magazine, or would you be willing to sponsor such a contest for high school students? We have a number of students in our school who would be interested in such a contest. Anything you could do would be appreciated.

Sincerely,

Nancy Holihan
Librarian

As John Campbell used to say, every issue of the magazine is a contest. If one of your students should write a story about photosynthetic human beings and it was good enough, we would publish it and pay for it at our usual rates. We don't, I'm afraid, sponsor the kind of contests you have in mind.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Isaac, etc.;

I've been meaning to write this note for some months now, but as usual, I'm behind. So I can't say, "Wow. I just read Bradley Denton's poem 'Mountain Shadow: Shawnee County, Kansas' and—" etc., because it's been a while. However, I can say that I've read it again and again and . . . Praise is in order; thanks, B.D., for composing it. Thanks, *IAsfm*, for sending it to my mailbox.

The poem gave me new hope for the recent SF-related poetry. Its rich imagery easily produced that "sense of wonder" we SF fanatics are supposed to know and love so well. Few of the new attempts in SF poetry, with their intent toward what some call "Vision," have touched me as B.D. did in the August, '85 issue.

Regrettably, the new SF poets too often seem to have forgotten this: When Olson, Spicer, Kerouac, and etc., etc. wrote free verse, it was with the intention of gaining freedom to do and say *more* with their words, not less. (And they understood that free verse wasn't simply sentences with funny margins.)

It would seem that good SF poetry is extremely difficult to write. But I remember Delany saying somewhere that he felt SF and poetry shared much in intent. He also made comment on the similarities between Zelazny's work and that of the Symbolists. SF is ripe for poets and poetry.

But. Think of "Howl," think of "The Waste Land," think of—hell, think of "The Inferno" and a lot of other good stuff. "Vision" has been around in poetry for a long time, from Homer to Tate and McClure. That is not new. What *is* new is trying to launch poetry from the pad of the SF conventions (not meaning the ones we attend). Too often, though, we've seen that launching pad strangely metamorphose into a locked cell, limitation.

Thanks again B.D., for showing that does not have to be the case.

Andy Tisbert
Crown Point, NY

I have often thought that if a poem were written as though it were prose: "Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are, that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm, how shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you from seasons such as these?" —it should still be clearly poetry. What say the rest of you?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Ike Asimov, et al.,

I've been a proud subscriber to this superb magazine for two years, and I intend to uphold my subscription. The stories never fail in jarring some of my memories untied and, with moving style, supplying me with new insights.

Today, September 16, 1985, I came home from school, filled with relief at the sight of *IAsfm* in my mailbox. I grabbed the magazine, and left the house with my mom to go to the orthodontist to get my braces tightened. On the way, I read and read, once more satisfied, and looking with suspense to the next sentence, trying to guess the possible endings. I didn't take my eyes off the page. *I couldn't.*

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When the ghastly time came to confront the merciless Doctor, to have my jaw subjected to excruciating agony, I was in the middle of "The One-Shoe Blues" by Ron Wolfe.

During the stinging pain of the twisting of metal in my mouth, my attention focused on "The One-Shoe Blues." I thought about how it might end, also analyzing it for literary techniques I learned while in Honors American Literature. It's obvious, science fiction readers and writers are intelligent.

I concentrated so much that the pain seemed to be in a distant land. The time went by at light speed.

Once set free from the chains of the torture chair I lowered my head, flipping to the page where I left off, and walked out of the room. If you're worried about my manners, I did say a cheerful, "Goodbye."

I finished the story in the car, a couple of minutes before I reached Wendy's to pick up some chili. You can't eat *anything* but soft foods once you get your braces tightened. *Braces are the pits.*

The ending to "The One-Shoe Blues" was totally unexpected and dazzling. Your magazine produced a wholesome, first-rate day for me. *Thanks!*

T.C. Taulli
Monrovia, CA

Clearly, every dentist in the English-speaking world should subscribe to IAsfm *and keep copies in the waiting room. The savings on novocaine and similar analgesics would be* enormous. *On the other hand,* I *need novocaine when addressed as Ike. My name is Isaac.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have seen the ads you carry for Micro Information Concepts Microbooks. Might I suggest that you consider offering a Microbooks subscription to *IAsfm?* True, not many of your readers have their own projectors (yet). But I for one, and perhaps there are others, would be very interested in that option.

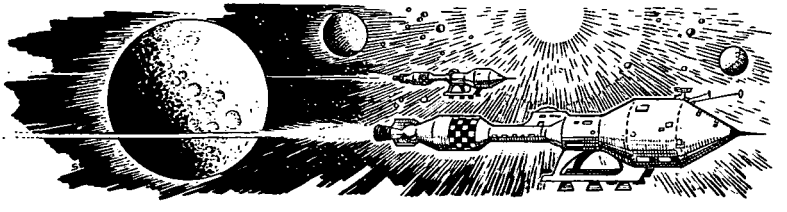
Whether you do or not, thank you for many years of good reading (most of it science fiction), and keep it coming for many more years. In a separate envelope I have extended my subscription for two years.

Sincerely,

Jesse Chisholm
333 Wartburg Place
Dubuque, Iowa

The Microbooks people are working on a complete set of IAsfm *and it will be offered in the course of time.*

—Isaac Asimov



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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

Game players and game companies have long looked forward to getting in on the Stephen King bandwagon. One can imagine a Stephen King role-playing game, a heady mix of grisly tales and rock 'n' roll. Now the first game to bear the magic King name has appeared, Mindscapes' *The Mist* ($39.95 for Apple and IBM), and it should please horror fans as well as the demanding "interactive fiction" buffs.

The Mist is one of a new series of licensed computer adventures from Mindscape, which includes *A View to a Kill* and, if you can believe it, *Rambo*. Other releases include *Forbidden Castle* and *Voodoo Island*. All of the adventures come in sturdy hardcover folders with an excellent "Introduction to Interactive Fiction."

Written for the horror anthology, *Dark Forces*, *The Mist* is a long novella about a small town in Maine engulfed by a thick, shroud-like fog. Residents who wander into the fog soon discover themselves devoured, crushed, or strangled by a bizarre variety of enormous (we're talking big, here) insects, crustaceans, and unnamed creatures with multitudinous tentacles. The hero of the story is stranded in a supermarket with his son, while some other foolish shoppers blunder out into the parking lot. Meanwhile, some religious fanatic in the store begins to work the crowd into a frenzy, calling for a sacrifice to the creatures.

We are, of course, in H.P. Lovecraft territory, the master of cosmic horror. Though apparently released (summoned?) by an army experiment gone wrong, the creatures in *The Mist* are kin to the ghastlies of Lovecraft's stories. Everything in the story, though, has a crisp, contemporary feel, with special attention to realism and King's own brand of ghoulishness.

As Interactive Fiction, Mindscape's *The Mist* does a pretty good job of capturing the flavor of King's story. The scenes inside the supermarket, with the crowd growing more edgy and dangerous, work very well. In the game, your son is not with you but back at your lakefront house. Your goal is to reach him and get to safety (if there is such a place).

The adventure is tough and punishing. Creatures on the level of truck-sized dragonflies are not easily bandied with. Often some unlikely item (such as a box of salt) can prove mighty important and helpful, if you can just figure out what to do with it. I didn't detect King's touch in any of the prose, but fans of the story should find it atmospheric and entertaining. People who haven't read *The Mist*

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might be oddly, even pleasantly confused as to what in the world is going on.

Mindscape includes a nice map of the town, complete with supermarket, church, side streets, and the Ho-Jo's by the highway. I found it extremely helpful for plotting my movement. And, needless to say, following the same course of action followed in the book is not at all advisible. In my case it lead to many unpleasant surprises. Whatever your strategy, save your position on another disk often, as some cosmic ghastly always seems ready to pounce.

Voodoo Island, also from Mindscape, starts off mighty unpromisingly. It seemed like the fifth or sixth "You're stranded on a deserted beach" adventure that I've played. And that's good because it immediately confounds those expectations. From the beach, you spy a volcano and a shrine, and you start wandering inland to arrive at one mighty strange hotel.

The hotel appears abandoned until you meet a rather uncommunicative clerk. He'll talk, but it will take some work to find out how. Exploring the various rooms leads to an endless hallway and some disturbing rooms. Zombie magic of a most arcane sort is at work here and, if you're unlucky, you'll run into the master of the house, Dr. Beauvais and his unkempt sidekick, Sharleen—a bathing beauty with the full figure so in fashion in the 1950s.

Voodoo Island does some interesting things. Usually, you see everything you need at first glance. There's no need for endless "look" commands. Also, you'd best remember what you see since the program doesn't necessarily repeat it each time you re-enter a room. Should you be about to do something stupidly lethal, the program will give you a moment to reconsider. With disappearing stairways and doors that lock behind you, *Voodoo Island* has a cheerfully malevolent aura.

The Mist and *Voodoo Island* are entertaining computer adventures, but there are things that could make them better. With most adventures, you do not start with any knowledge. So, even if your character has lived or worked in a location for years, he/she doesn't know what's downstairs, or down the next block. This could be changed by including maps and background information to indicate things, locations, and people that you would know. The map of the town in *The Mist* is a small step in that direction.

Also, the adventurer should make some use of graphics. While it may not be necessary to have a cartoon for every paragraph, graphics can be an exciting and entertaining part of an adventure. Both Telarium and Activision have been making good use of maps and important illustrations. Graphics can break the tedium of merely reading paragraphs off a monitor, while broadening the type of clues and play.

With licensing and novelizations bringing new audiences to the keyboard, interactive fiction will continue to develop. In the meantime, *The Mist* and *Voodoo Island* should keep you bolting your front door as you play late into the night. ●

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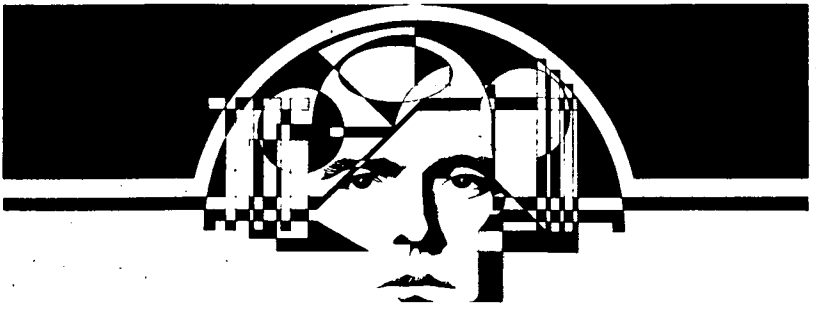
MARTIN GARDNER

987654321



Now and then, to vary this column, I like to move away from SF themes and give a quiz that teaches some science or math. This month's quiz is based on elementary number theory. Each question can be answered in a jiffy if you know some simple theorems about the integers. Each concerns the same sequence of digits: 987654321. Of course you must try to answer the questions quickly, and without the aid of a calculator.

9. A prime is a number divisible only by itself and 1. Prove that 987654321 is not a prime.

8. A factorial number n is the product of $1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times \ldots \times n$, and is written $n!$ Prove that 987654321 is not a factorial.

7. Imagine that superbeings in some higher dimension play card games with a deck that consists of n cards, where n is our sequence 987654321 repeated one million times. Can these cards be evenly divided among four players?

6. Can they be evenly divided among six players?

5. Can they be evenly divided among eight players?

4. Can they be evenly divided among eleven players?

3. Prove that 987654321 is not a power of 2,4,5,6, or 8.

2. A perfect number is the sum of all its divisors, including 1 but not itself. Six is perfect because $6 = 1 + 2 + 3$, and 28 is perfect because $28 = 1 + 2 + 4 + 7 + 14$. It is not known if there is an infinity of perfect numbers. Exactly 30 have been identified. The largest, discovered

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by accident in 1985 by computer scientists, working on another problem for an oil company in Houston, is

$$2^{216091} - 1\ (2^{216090}).$$

The number outside the parentheses is called a Mersenne prime because it has the form of $2^n - 1$, where n is prime. It has 65,050 digits, and is the largest known prime.

Prove that 987654321 is not perfect. This calls for an obscure rule, but an interesting one that is worth knowing.

1: There is only one way to insert plus and minus signs inside the sequence 987654321 to make the total 2:

$9 + 87 - 65 + 4 - 32 - 1 = 2.$

Allowing a minus sign in front of the 9, find in 30 seconds a way to add signs that make a total of -2.

You'll find the answers on page 100

A WORKER IN THE RUINS OF GANYMEDE

An alien of mud, bathed in sweat running
sinuous brown rills down his chest,
the excavator leans against an x-ray unit
and talks artifacts with a woman five meters
below on a neighboring level. These quarried
plots, forming cubist structures of adobe,
darken to rusty malachite in the dying light.
The atmosphere above the dome turns cyanic,
a film of lichen on bleached bone.
Quitting for the day, the worker removes
his dirtbag headdress and nose filters.
The friend offers up a smoke of Terran weed.
Later in the newly restored Plaza of Myths,
he'll boast of a big day, of pot sherds
magenta as the thumbprint of the Great Spot.
But in truth that's last year's treasure.
Today's are only a minutiae of flecks pressed
into his palms, thin as the shimmering veil
of Jupiter's dust ring, as the lenses that
filter the raw sun from his dreamless eyes.

—Robert Frazier

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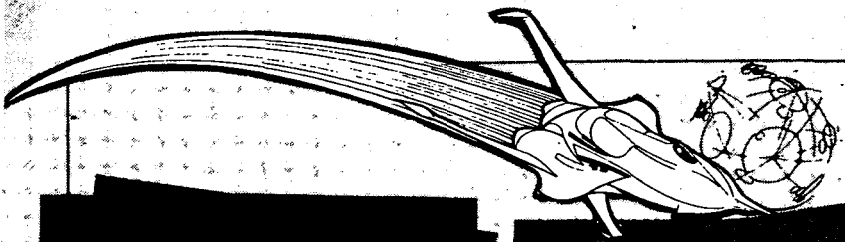

Connie Willis

Photo by C. N. Brown/Locus

Bruce Sterling

William Gibson and Kim Stanley Robinson

Photo by Rick Hawes/Locus

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VIEWPOINT

A USER'S GUIDE TO THE POSTMODERNS

Including the Battle for the Future, Unbridled Ambition, the Fate of the Children in the Starship, the Cyberpunk-Humanist Wars, Blood Under the Banquet Tables, Metaphors Run Amok, and the Destruction of Atlantis!

by Michael Swanwick

Michael Swanwick has just finished his second novel *Vacuum Flowers*. Two of his stories, "Dogfight" (a collaboration with William Gibson) and "The Gods of Mars" (co-written with Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois), were finalists for this year's Nebula award. His last story in *IAsfm*, "Snow Job" (October 1985), was also co-written with Mr. Dozois.

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VIEWPOINT

It's been said that every generation creates its own horde of invading barbarians in its young. This is certainly the case in the radioactive hothouse of science fiction, where new literary generations arise once every five or so years to challenge the establishment with a new vision of how the stuff ought to be written. A careful scholar could trace these waves from Hugo Gernsback's original gang of engineer-savants onward, but a simple demonstration proof can begin in the mid-1960s when Samuel Delany, Thomas Disch, R.A. Lafferty, Norman Spinrad, and Roger Zelazny ushered in the New Wave. In the early seventies, it was Ursula K. Le Guin, Barry Malzberg, Joanna Russ, James Tiptree, Jr., and Gene Wolfe. In the *mid*-seventies, it was Gregory Benford, Jack Dann, Gardner Dozois, Michael Bishop, Joe Haldeman, John Varley, and . . . but more of them later. The significant point being that from the very beginning these changeovers have been accomplished with a certain amount of grumbling, screaming, firing off of guns and fisticuffs in the hallways. It was either traditional, or a law of nature. No one was sure which.

The most extreme example of generational conflict came, of course, in the 1960s, when the controversy over the New Wave escalated to near-violence. On one side were the new writers entering the field who were not willing to abide its traditional restrictions (no graphic sex, a plain "naturalistic" prose style, emphasis on idea to the exclusion of character) and on the other side, their predecessors, suddenly labeled Old Wave, who objected to the new influences tainting their literary water hole (graphic sex, "experimental" prose, emphasis on mood or character to the exclusion of idea). Even today, when the positions of each side can be calmly discussed and evaluated—not here!—it is hard to understand why the debate got as acrimonious as it did, with each side vociferously denying the right of the other to even exist. Though Freud might have made some shrewd guesses.

In the 1980s, a new generation came into science fiction. This time, however, the army marched into the Eternal City and found it

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undefended. The lion gates were open; there were no archers on the walls. The citizenry turned out to throw flowers, and petty officials proffered the key to the city. The barbarians were dumbfounded. They'd spent years assembling their arms, perfecting their tactics, honing their skills, and they were spoiling for battle. They had to fight *some*one.

They looked at one another.

The generation I want to talk about hasn't been named yet. In this essay I'll call them the postmoderns, because it's a nonjudgmental term, and because it fairly reflects their unspoken belief that all science fiction leading up to and culminating in their generation is—let's face it—dead. All the postmoderns are talented, ambitious writers, steeped in the lore and history of the field, and the controversies of previous generations are old news to them, settled long ago and to their complete satisfaction. It's only natural that they would want to seize control of the future of science fiction, to plot its directions and aims and goals—this is exactly what all previous generations demanded and, more or less, got. But there

Photo by Barbara Flynn

James Patrick Kelly

"It's ambition that makes them take the time to write killer short stories when they know that in practically the same amount of time and with less psychic effort they could cop a quick 10k for novelizing episodes of 'The Misfits of Science.' . . . They're determined to stand out in this overcrowded field and they're willing to do the extra work."

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are truths that can only be discovered in the heat of argument, and as writers they all knew that you can't generate excitement without conflict. A Revolution is no good without an active Opposition.

Fortunately, there was a natural division within the postmodern ranks.

The first group, the humanists, produce literate, often consciously literary fiction, focusing on human characters who are generally seen as frail and fallible, and using the genre to explore large philosophical questions, sometimes religious in nature. A short list of names would have to include Connie Willis, Kim Stanley Robinson, John Kessel, Scott Russell Sanders, Carter Scholz, and James Patrick Kelly.

The other group has been tagged the cyberpunks (a story in itself; see the postscript for details and controversy). Their fiction is stereotypically characterized by a fully-realized high-tech future, "crammed" prose, punk attitudes including antagonism to authority, and bright inventive details. They would have to include William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner, Greg Bear, possibly Rudy Rucker, and sometimes Pat Cadigan.

Several streams of influence came together to form the cyberpunk thing. In the early seventies a group formed up that came to be known as the outlaw fantasists—Howard Waldrop, Steve Utley, Jake Saunders, Tom Reamy, a few others. They wrote truly strange fantasies marked by eclectic themes and outrageous ideas. Waldrop, for example, has written fantasies about dodoes, phlogiston, tractor pulls, telekinetic sumo wrestlers, and in one unforgettable flight of lunacy ("God's Hooks") had Izaak Walton and John Bunyan fishing in the Slough of Despond. *Nothing* seemed out of bounds to them, though, oddly enough, they rarely created high-tech futures. Since many of the outlaws lived in Texas, it was only natural that they should get together now and then, and the Turkey City Writers' Workshops brought in a wave of new young writers. Some, like Leigh Kennedy, became outlaw fantasists in their own right (witness her excellent and disturbing "Her Furry Face").

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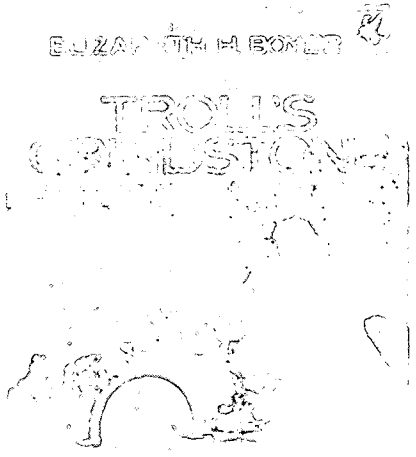

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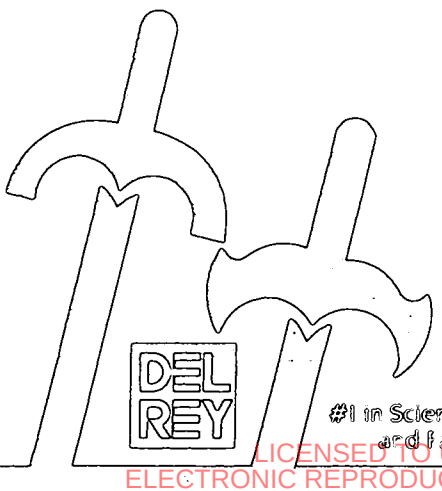

#1 in Science Fiction and Fantasy

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VIEWPOINT

Others, like Shiner and Sterling, kept this wild sense of freedom, but mutated into something new.

The second major component is a kind of love-hate relationship with "hot tech," and here the track runs in and out of genre, from the high trash of A.E. Van Vogt and Charles Harness, through the 1950s future portrayed in *Popular Science* and *Mechanix Illustrated* (later satirized by Gibson in "The Gernsback Continuum"), the scat rhythms of Alfred Bester, corporate propaganda such as the 1964 World's Fair dioramas, the street-loner stance of Harlan Ellison, Japanese commercial art, the punk attitudes of John Shirley*, and the societal backlash against the sixties' antitechnological Arcadianism. Stir in strong doses of early Delany and Zelazny, a few out-of-genre writers, some Varley, a dollop of Stapledon, and you have the primal soup from which this new life form arose.

The humanists, on the other hand, have an easier, more immediate line of descent. They are the legitimate children of science fiction's "lost generation"—those post-New Wave writers of the seventies who have never been adequately celebrated or even examined collectively, and whom Tom Disch, in an article that most of them found offensive, tagged "The Labor Day Group." This band would have to include George R. R. Martin, Ed Bryant, Vonda McIntyre, Joe Haldeman, Jack Dann, Elizabeth Lynn, Michael Bishop, Gardner Dozois, Greg Benford, and Joan Vinge. What they shared was a primary loyalty to science fiction and a belief that there is no argument between art and their chosen genre—that science fiction need not be written in oblique, metafictional *New York Review of Books* approved modes to be—really and truly—literature. (These writers are all still producing and in many cases turning out their best work to date, but the cutting edge of change has moved beyond them. In biological terms, they have

*I've listed Shirley as a literary ancestor where others would include him as a cyberpunk proper because he made his mark on the field years before any of the writers discussed here. His footprints are all over the cyberpunks' turf. It could be said that he serves as their John the Baptist figure.

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donated their genetic material, and are now superfluous to our argument.)

To this direct influence the humanists bring a strong interest in outside literature, the high art "mainstream" stuff that outrages many of the pulp traditionalists (a group which, strange to say, includes several of the cyberpunks). John Kessel won a Nebula for "Another Orphan," a story which presupposes a certain familiarity with Melville's *Moby Dick*. Kim Stanley Robinson quoted Jean Paul Sartre—approvingly!—in "Green Mars." Is there anything better calculated to make the propeller beanie crowd gnash their teeth in outrage? I doubt it. I also doubt that this new generation is any more literate or better read than their progenitors. But where Martin, Bryant, *et al.* were too cagey (and perhaps too weary of the endless meaninglessness of the New Wave wars) to breathe their extrageneric influences aloud, the humanists stride forward with the fearless tread of angels.

What the postmoderns on both sides of the divide share in common is a confidence that borders on arrogance. They may like and even praise selected older writers (though they prefer 'em dead or obscure), but mostly they feel their predecessors are irrelevant, for good or for ill. "I hesitate to say it," Kessel is quoted in an interview in *Fantasy Review*, "but many of the works we call the best the field has to offer just do not measure up to the best of English and American fiction of the last couple of hundred years. Melville, Nabokov, Flannery O'Connor, Jane Austen, Faulkner, Conrad—these authors are a lot better, by almost any standard, than Herbert, Heinlein, Asimov, Zelazny and others." The science fiction writers mentioned would probably be surprised that anyone felt this statement needed to be made. And yet, you can tell, Kessel deplores the situation. "If we want to make it in the big leagues," he continues, "we've got to face big league pitching." Listen carefully and you can hear under his mild words the implicit brag that science fiction *can* make it in the big leagues, that it *can* face down Faulkner's spitball or Nabokov's sinker, and in his use of the first person plural, he

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reserves for himself a place in the batting lineup. This kind of amibition is alien to none of the Postmoderns. They are all (and let's not lose sight of this fact) aiming high. They want to make it in the majors, and small fry like Heinlein, Asimov, and Clarke are simply not the competition.

Commenting on this very phenomenon, James Patrick Kelly wrote of his fellow postmoderns, "It's ambition that makes them take the time to write killer short stories when they know that in practically the same amount of time and with less psychic effort they could cop a quick 10k for novelizing episodes of 'The Misfits of Science.' It's ambition that supports them as they stagger out of libraries laden with armloads of books that haven't been taken out since 1962. They're determined to stand out in this overcrowded field and they're willing to do the extra work." Which brings up another interesting topic, the curious mingling of respect and disdain with which the postmoderns approach their audience. They are willing to do that extra month's research it takes to establish the below-decks layout of a Spanish galleon or how Mozart actually spelled his middle name, for a story whose proceeds are not going to cover that month's food bill, because they know their readers care. And if their readers don't care, they can just go pound sand.

When the Postmoderns entered the field, science fiction was in an uncharacteristically self-effacing state. As Sterling later put it, "SF was drifting without a rudder, at the mercy of every commercial breeze. New Wave had nothing to tell me. I'd grown up on it, and it was yellow and crisp around the edges, like an atticful of old *New Worlds*." Nobody was fighting for the leading edge of SF. There was scattered chest-thumping and self-promotion, to be sure, but no organized cabals plotting the Overthrow and Destruction of Everything Sacred. The best writers were silent: The Old Wavers and New Wavers had by and large bludgeoned each other into critical quiescence. The Labor Day Group was either lying fallow (several of their best

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VIEWPOINT

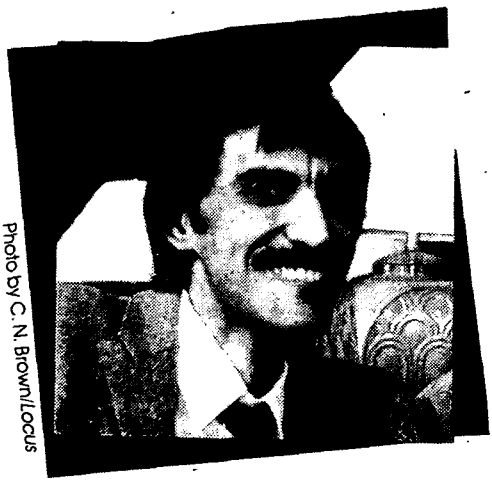

Photo by C. N. Brown/Locus

John Kessel

"...but many of the works we call the best the field has to offer just do not measure up to the best of English and American fiction of the last couple of hundred years.... If we want to make it in the big leagues, we've got to face big league pitching."

had written very little in recent years) or working on large, serious books that they hoped would break them either out of genre or into major critical acclaim. (George R.R. Martin's *Fevre Dream* and Michael Bishop's *No Enemy But Time* are works of this period.) The guards were absent from their posts and the security systems had been shorted out. The starship's control room was vacant. Soft lights flickered, and the instrument panels hummed gently to themselves, waiting for somebody's guiding hand.

As the Postmoderns began their careers, they engaged in a frenzy of influence swapping and alliance forming. Here the cyberpunks stole an early march, forming themselves into as tight a clique as the field had seen since the Futurians, while the humanists were still gosh-wowing at the mere fact of being allowed to play with the Big Kids at all. Later, the pseudonymous Vincent Omniaveritas would launch his single-sheet Xeroxed fanzine, *Cheap Truth,* the *de facto* propaganda organ of the cyberpunk movement. Aggressively uncopyrighted and

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mailed free to whomever Vincent thought should read it, it was to prove remarkably influential. (Its opening words, "As American SF lies in a reptilian torpor, its small, squishy cousin, Fantasy, creeps gecko-like across the bookstands," both put the challenge to the status quo, and demonstrated Vince's talent for invective. When he raises his arms to call down anathema upon the unworthy, toads fall from the sky.) In the meantime, both the protocyberpunks and the humanists-to-be were meeting, workshopping, and, in furies of creativity, hammering together the prose machines with which to take the asylum by storm.

But artistic satisfaction is not enough if your ambitions aspire to the reformation and redirection of all science fiction. Influence is not achieved without recognition and even popularity, and a way of keeping score was needed. The best-of-the-year anthologies were too easy, and the Hugos, which largely depend on pre-existing popularity, were too hard. Much of the cyperpunk-humanist wars would be slugged out in the Nebula award banquets of the next few years.

While our aspirant writers are busy producing the stories they hope will reshape the future, let's take a quick look at two of them, both humanists:

In some ways Connie Willis is the most subversive of the lot, refusing to give in to the bohemian conventions of the field, even to her defiantly normal appearance (shortly after she won two Nebulas in a single year, there was a tempest-in-a-teapot controversy over whether a Nebula winner should be *allowed* to wear Peter Pan collars). Interviewed in *Mile High Futures,* she admitted to attending church, and said that she got some of her best ideas from adult Sunday school classes. In a field that is still defending Galileo from Urban VIII, and producing thinly disguised attacks on the Spanish Inquisition, this is heresy of the first magnitude. She also started out by writing for the women's confession magazines, and is not only unashamed of the experience, but claims to have learned useful skills from it.

Willis' prose is notable for her use of characterization by plotting and the sparsity of

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physical description. This gives a Willis story a unique and recognizable look and is in its own right an interesting technique. Also notable is that no two of her stories are alike. Willis is deliberately stretching her range, from the traditional realism of "Fire Watch" through such fairytale retellings as "The Father of the Bride" and the screwball comedy of "Blued Moon." It will be a long time, if ever, before she lets herself be restricted to a single type of story.

John Kessel is tall and quiet, with a large, dark moustache and an oxymoronic smile that manages to be both shy and confident at the same time. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Kansas and is an Assistant Professor of English at North Carolina State University. This, he has said, gives him the freedom to write whatever he likes, even in defiance of popular tastes, since he needn't rely on his writing to keep him alive. Despite a baccalaureate in both English and Physics, his work is almost exclusively fantasy. It is, however, a fantasy that is not interested so much in the fantastic as in the human reactions to it. In "The Lecturer," for example, a teacher becomes interested in a strange living statue that stands on campus engaged in an endless (and perfectly dull) lecture, and finds that nobody—even, ultimately, himself—wants to face up to the fact that this is simply *not natural*. The statue is never explained.

Kessel's output, while influential, is not large, and much of it has been written in collaboration with James Patrick Kelly. The bulk of their collaborations were conceived as parts of a whole and make up their novel, *Freedom Beach*.

The mere existence of Willis and Kessel was enough to annoy cyberpunk sensibilities. The fact that they were writing strong stories in competition for the same limited number of awards, limited niches in *Omni* (which offers a word rate that a writer could almost live on, if they only bought more stories)* and the same limited amount of popular and critical attention, made them a menace.

The humanists may not have been as well organized, but the

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THE WAVE AND THE FLAME

PART I OF LEAR'S DAUGHTERS

By M. BRADLEY KELLOGG

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first blood went to them. In 1982 they won the first Nebulas. John Kessel took Novella with "Another Orphan," and Connie Willis took both Novelet and Short Story for "Fire Watch" and "A Letter From the Clearys." A little later "Fire Watch" also won a Hugo. It was a clean sweep for the humanists. (Novel went to Michael Bishop, but since neither faction had anything up in that category, this was irrelevant.) Worse, "Fire Watch" beat out "Burning Chrome" by Gibson and "Swarm" by Sterling. What made this all but unbearable is that these latter stories were not just good stories, but major works that were seen in many quarters as instant classics, and the cyberpunks were not likely to be writing better soon. They had gone into the fray with their best, and they had lost.

Vincent Omniaveritas cranked the *Cheap Truth* propaganda machine up high. Demanding across-the-board reforms, he snarled: "It is little wonder that rock videos, like Napoleon, have pulled SF's crown from the gutter and placed it on their own heads. Movement, excitement, color, reckless visionary drive: you will find these in abundance in the work of video directors and bands raised from birth on SF. Consequently they are producing not only excellent SF, but SF often better than that in the written media." And, getting down to cases, Sue Denim wrote, "This year's Nebula ballot looked like a list of stuff that Mom and Dad said it was okay to read." Not long after, reviewing the Dozois Best of the Year anthology from Bluejay Books (in which Dozois singled out the " '80s generation" for praise, and listed its members), Omniaveritas wrote, "If these heirs-designate were dropped into a strong magnetic field, Gibson, Shiner, Sterling, Cadigan, and Bear would immediately drift to one pole . . . Robinson, Kessel, Kelly, Murphy, and Willis would take the other." This was the moment of schism. Sides had been chosen, names dropped, and the battle could commence.

This hotted-up phase of the

*Here too, the cyberpunks got in their groundwork early, finding a warm welcome in *Omni*'s pages. For a time, in fact, fiction editor Ellen Datlow was known, for her support of the group in general and her discovery of William Gibson in particular, as "the queen of punk SF."

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campaign lasted for the next few years. But before leaving 1982, let's take a quick look at two more Postmoderns, both cyberpunks this time.

Bill Gibson bears a striking resemblance to Elvis Costello, but is much taller; like Costello, he is seen by his supporters as working right at the artistic edge, a position they deem virtuous in and of itself. As of 1982, his already formidable reputation was based on exactly two stories, "Burning Chrome," and "Johnny Mnemonic," both published in *Omni*. (He'd written a few other stories, mostly minor, but they brought him little attention—though no opprobrium either.) Sooner or later he would have to write a novel, and there was a certain tension to the question of whether he could carry the magic over into the greater and more demanding length.

Gibson's work is quintessential cyberpunk, with the hottest of technological futures, fast action, tight construction, and a disdain for all that is slow and boring. He has been acclaimed as a new breed of hard science fictioneer, a laurel he gracefully declined in

Photo by Jane Jewell

Pat Cadigan

". . .it has been charged that Pat Cadigan, while a fine writer, is no cyberpunk at all. . . . And while stories like 'Roadside Rescue' (which is, if anything, Outlaw Fantasy) support this contention, her Pathosfinder stories and the hard-edged grittiness of 'Rock On' and 'Pretty Boy Crossover' put her firmly—if only occasionally—among the cyberpunks."

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an interview for *Interzone:* "I think that a number of reviewers have mistaken my sense of realism, of the *commercial surfaces* of characters' lives, for some deep and genuine attempt to understand technology. I'm as fascinated—well, a bit more so, actually—by what motivates someone to go out and buy a pair of Calvin Klein jeans as I am by the workings of a surgical laser. Which is not to say that I am blind to the beauty and importance (or the poetry) of surgical lasers. . . ." In all the excitement it would be easy to overlook the fact that he's an exacting craftsman and stylist on the small scale—line by line—as well as the large, a writer who can join two phrases seamlessly and with a swipe of the chamois make them glitter darkly. He was universally seen as the cyberpunks' big threat, their Babe Ruth, the Moses who was going to lead them out of the literary wastes and into the promised land of New and Better Science Fiction.

Bruce Sterling has already, in his short career, had three literary incarnations. First as a promising, largely ignored young writer (his first novel, *Involution Ocean,* a Harlan Ellison Discovery Series book, was . . . well, promising and largely ignored). Following *The Artificial Kid,* a now rare hardcover in which he broke through into (and possibly invented) cyberpunk, he emerged as the suddenly hot writer of the Shapers/Mechanists Factions stories, which combined pulp sensibilities and plotting, Stapledonian perspective, and cyberpunk incandescence. "Swarm" was a Factions story, and one of the best of them. After the publication of *Schismatrix,* his culminative Factions novel, in 1985, he moved into a third stage as a slick and quirky literary stylist, in stories (such as "Telliamed," "Green Days in Brunei," and "Dinner in Audoghast") which retain the color and excitement of cyberpunk, but move beyond it into something new. In his chameleonic incarnations, this shamanistic skin-shedding trick makes him by far the most interesting postmodern to watch, just to see what surprises come next.

It was 1983. The battle lines

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were drawn. And a surprising new ally presented himself. Greg Bear, who had been laboring in the promising-and-largely-ignored vineyards for several years, suddenly found his voice, and published two stories ("Hardfought" and "Blood Music") which in their bright inventiveness, bold daring, and cheerful pessimism were—there was no getting around it—cyberpunk. Working in perfect isolation from the faction, Bear had independently invented the cyberpunks' style, and they loved him for it. He was welcomed to the ranks with open arms.

At the same time, the cyberpunks saw a new threat shaping up, a writer who seemed to them the most talented and menacing of all the humanists, Kim Stanley Robinson.

Kim Stanley Robinson has the cold glitter of gunslinger to him, the kind of contained look that makes rivals nervous. To see him and Gibson talking together, even in photographs, is to be struck that there is much that these two are *not* saying to each other, that there are killer truths hiding just beneath the skin. Robinson combined high literary sensibilities (I've heard an editor who missed signing him up try to shrug him off as obviously being a mainstream art writer who didn't yet realize he was just passing through SF on the way to bigger things) with a strong, lucid prose style. He'd already gotten critical attention with stories ("At the North Pole of Pluto," "Exploring Fossil Canyon," and "Venice Drowned," for example) that combined topnotch writing and traditional science fiction themes pushed that little bit further. In 1983 he published "Black Air," a novella about a young boy dragooned into the Spanish Armada. It was about suffering and mercy, the writing was so good you could taste the North Atlantic, the underlying mysticism all worked, and to the cyberpunks it was infuriating. "It's so nice to read a straightforward historical story, just like that Frank G. Slaughter used to write," Sue Denim hissed in *Cheap Truth*, "and it's just too bad he had to tack on that fantasy mumbo jumbo at the end just so he could sell it."

"Black Air" won the World Fantasy Award for 1983, and

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once again the humanists had stolen a march on the cyberpunks. Another major award had fallen to the enemy: That same year Bear left the Nebula ceremonies with two awards, for "Blood Music" and "Hardfought" and while this was a moral victory and an encouraging sign that the Right Stuff might yet win through, it was not enough. Bear was only an honorary cyberpunk; he had earned a place in the ranks through sheer merit, much as he had earned his Nebulas. He was not part of the cabal that had labored late into the dark night of obscurity, shivering in unheated garages to create cyberpunk and make it work. The victory they wanted so bad they could taste it, their vindication, could not be obtained that easily.

1984, and the trenches were manned. Terry Carr was editing the revitalized Ace Specials line for Susan Allison at the Berkley Publishing Group, and he shrewdly mangaged to sign up many of the most promising new writers. The lineup of the first five books contained the conflict in miniature. It led off with Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Wild Shore,* followed by Lucius Shepard's *Green Eyes*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Carter Scholz's and Glenn Harcourt's *Palimpsests,* and Howard Waldrop's *Them Bones*. These books got a lot of serious attention, most of it favorable, and there was much year's end discussion of the New Generation of writers, and where they might lead SF.

(Carter Scholz, who has not been discussed previous to this, belongs firmly in the humanist camp. He is the most defiantly intellectual of the lot, and this has to a certain degree slowed down his career. And yet works like his screamingly funny "The Nine Billion Names of God"—knowledgeable readers will realize that the joke begins with the title—show that he is out there on the literary intellectual outposts not through ignorance or inability but by choice.)

Robinson was first out of the gate. In *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Algis Budrys wrote, "Kim Stanley Robinson . . . is an uncommonly gifted writer. But he is also an

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uncommon sort of writer for our whereabouts, and therefore it's notable to me that Terry Carr and Ace, in re-instituting the Ace Special series, waited until they had his novel to begin the series with. They literally did that—there are other books in the Special inventory, from other new and promising writers, that waited for Robinson to deliver *The Wild Shore*."* The novel itself fulfilled John W. Campbell's dream of a literature as it might be written by somebody in the future in which the story is set (though it's doubtful what JWC would have made of this *particular* fulfillment). It is a classical *Bildungsroman*, a gentle, almost introspective exploration of a boy's growth to manhood and the beginnings of wisdom, within an enigmatic post-Collapse America. It defies and plays against the expectations of the genre adventure novel, even including within itself a parody of the book it could have been. (There is an unforgettable and telling moment during a public reading of this supposedly non-fiction work, when the adults can no longer hold in their laughter, and fall to the ground, howling, great tears of mirth rolling down their cheeks, while the children glare at them angrily.) It was received with critical and popular acclaim.

When the dust settled, the cyberpunks realized that this was their showdown at last. William Gibson was marching slowly down Main Street, gun at thigh, to face down Kim Stanley Robinson. It was *Neuromancer* against *The Wild Shore*. Cyberpunk versus humanist. It was High Noon.

To read *Cheap Truth* from this period, it's fairly obvious that the cyberpunks expected another defeat. It wasn't just that Budrys and Ace had already crowned Robinson king. *Neuromancer* was simply too good, too far ahead of its time. It was destined to be defeated by the purblind provincialism of the field.

Tensions ran high. "The 1985 Nebula Awards will be handed out on May 4," Sue Denim wrote, "fifteen years to the day from the shootings at Kent State

*In fact, Budrys was mistaken about this, according to Kim Stanley Robinson. Robinson notes that his novel was not originally supposed to lead off the line, but was hastily shoved forward when the scheduled lead novel was not received in time.

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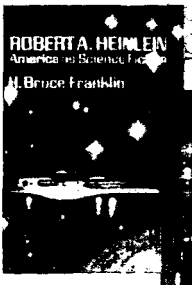

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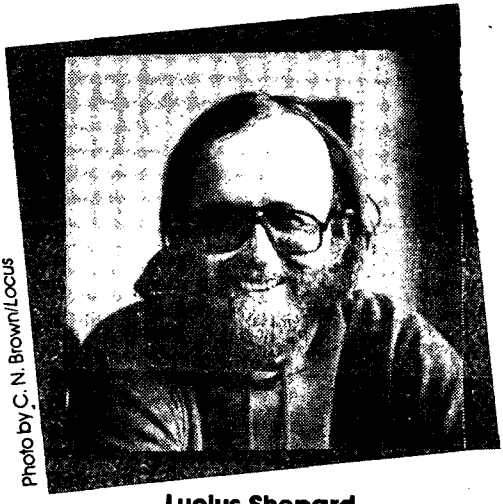

Photo by C. N. Brown/*Locus*

Lucius Shepard

"Shepard belongs in neither cyberpunk nor humanist camps. His fiction has the mean edge of the cyberpunks and the human angle of the humanists, yet lacks the hot tech ambiance of the one, and the defiant literariness of the other. . . . let's just see him as symptomatic of the new surge of writers coming up from obscurity. The ground is bubbling underfoot, and. . . The cutting edge is about to move on."

University in Ohio. Once again the armed might of conservatism faces the radical vision of a new generation, this time across the distance of a ballot," and she vowed, "Political oppression breeds revolution. For every Heinlein that smites a Gibson, thousands more will rise in his place."

If for no other reason than to preserve dramatic pacing and properly draw out suspense, it's best we pause here to look quickly at several other writers who play significant roles in our narrative. In the humanist camp, we have yet to introduce James Patrick Kelly, whose work has been largely overshadowed by that of his collaborator, John Kessel. It would be a mistake to overlook him. A quiet man who has been known to wear three-piece suits to science fiction conventions, Kelly has an exceptionally lucid prose style, employing what Kessel calls "the kind of skill that hides skill." This is not only a tough style to attain but a brutal one to have mastered, since it leaves the writer with not a florid adjective to hide behind. He has written some first-rate hardcore humanist

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stories (notably, "The Empty World," which is about an encounter with Emily Brontë) and is also getting attention for his trilogy of stories, "Solstice," "Rat," and "The Prisoner of Chillon." Of which, more soon.

Scott Russell Sanders makes no strong distinctions between his genre and mainstream writings. In his words, "I write what I feel like writing, in whatever form or mode seems appropriate, and then agents and editors have to worry about how to publish and market it." This is the voice of a generation; none of the postmoderns are overconcerned about writing to expectations. However, where others feel this freedom in principle, he puts it into practice, writing everything from *Wonders Hidden* (a "historical" about Audubon) through the science fictional *Terrarium*, into the non-fiction *Stone Country* (with photographer Jeffrey A. Wolin, a study of Indiana limestone and the men who cut it, in history and lore). In his SF story "Ascension," the husband of the mayor of a small town suffering from mass insomnia retreats into a surplus space suit, there to sleep and await his symbolic transcendence. (And what, one wonders, would John W. Campbell have made of *that?)*

On the cyberpunk side, Rudy Rucker, the third of their Big Guns, strays farther from consensus reality than any of the other Postmoderns, producing work strongly reminiscent of what Henry Kuttner once published under the name of Lewis Padgett. A mathematician by training (he has written popular books on the subject) he pulls off admirably zany excesses with great nonchalance. His novels in particular *(White Light, Master of Space and Time,* and *Software* leap to mind) have earned him an enthusiastic following. Comparing his text to that of his cohorts, one has to sadly conclude that he is *sui generis,* no cyberpunk at all, but rather a one-man subgenre all by himself. However, the cyberpunks love him for his daring, excess, and clear-eyed craziness, and have claimed him as one of their own.

Lewis Shiner has thus far rested in the shadow of the Big Three—his first novel, *Frontera,* in an almost allegorical

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juxtaposition, landed on the Nebula ballot opposite Gibson—but he was a strong writer to begin with, and shows constant growth. Lately he seems to be coming more and more into his own voice with such stories as "Till Human Voices Wake Us," the well-received "The War at Home," and his crisp, unforgiving look at working-class failure, "Jeff Beck." If you strip away the fantastic element from his work (he likes dealing with outré belief systems, such as those of Aleister Crowley or current particle physics), what remains is a particularly vivid brand of realism. Finally, it has been charged that Pat Cadigan, while a fine writer, is no cyberpunk at all (she has also been called "the Dorothy Parker of science fiction," but that's another can of terms entirely, and one we won't open). And while stories like "Roadside Rescue" (which is, if anything, Outlaw Fantasy) support this contention, her Pathosfinder stories and the hard-edged grittiness of "Rock On" and "Pretty Boy Crossover" put her firmly—if only occasionally—among the cyberpunks. When she veers into fantasy, however, she often displays the keenest, and occasionally meanest, sense of humor of any of the postmoderns, excepting only Rucker.

Which brings us back to the 1984 Nebulas, and William Gibson's climactic showdown. His weapon was a novel that "eroticizes computers the way that Bruce Springsteen eroticizes cars" (here I'm quoting his publisher's publicity sheet), and he didn't expect it to find a large audience. But Nebula Fever strikes where it will, and as the date approached, his followers had their secret hopes. Adrenalin flowed, nerves stretched to the breaking point, palms grew sweaty and . . .

Neuromancer took everything with embarrassing ease. It not only won the Nebula for best novel, but the Philip K. Dick award for best paperback original, and the Hugo award as well. At the same time, it was garnering overwhelmingly positive reviews both in and out of genre, in everything from *Amazing* to the *Whole Earth Review*. Even the New York *Times* gave it a rave, though it waited over a year to do so, and

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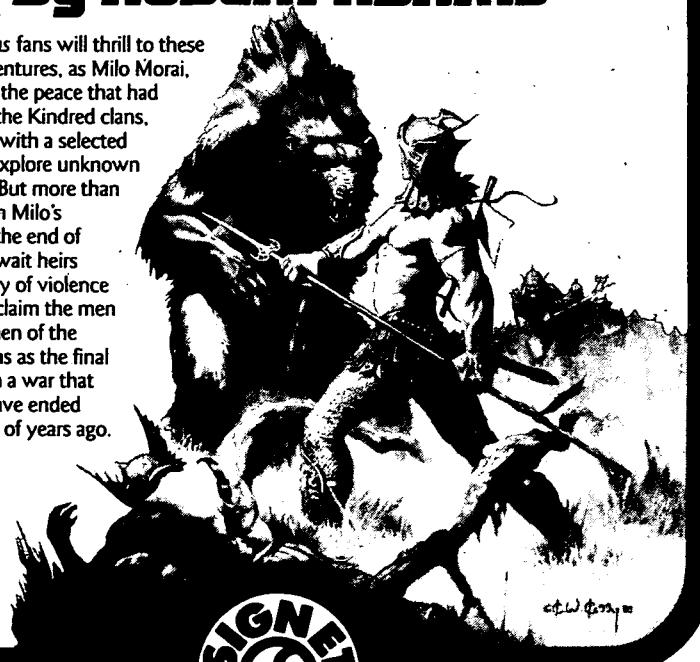

SIGNET SCIENCE FICTION

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then (in their recommended Christmas reading list) got the plot wrong. It was an unprecedented triumph for a first novel, the kind that every writer dreams of yet dares not hope for. And Gibson got it all.

This success threw the ranks into disarray. The cyberpunks were left all alone in the middle of the battlefield, enemy in full retreat, the spoils before them, the acknowledged New Direction of SF all theirs, and they were barely winded. Without warning, they were victorious.

It was just too damned easy.

The fight hadn't been as much fun as they'd expected. And the result? Virtue *rewarded?* It was as if they'd found themselves suddenly transported into the middle of a Christian allegory; the fact that one of their number had been cast as the Pilgrim made it no more palatable. In *Cheap Truth,* Candace Barragus proceeded to trash Gibson, writing, "There is little true anger in *Neuromancer* or in punk rock. The rest is posturing, and finally rings hollow. . . . If SF is to give us new lands, it will have to try harder than this. *Neuromancer* has little thought in it—surely the old corporate-run future, with Japanese electro-dominance, can't be counted as a new idea?—but much attention to the cosmetics of a time only slightly beyond our own." But while Ms. Barragus (who, sad to say is not Gibson himself—Gibson has never written for *Cheap Truth)* spelled out several valid (but irrelevant) flaws in the novel, nobody rose to the bait. It seemed they had not an enemy in the world. Victory was complete.

In the aftermath, everybody was left feeling vaguely dissatisfied. A new generation of cyberpunks—identifiable by their prose, but nobody that anybody had ever *met*—was coming up. The cyberpunks had created a subgenre that was easy to imitate, and they couldn't help but wonder if somehow they shouldn't have aimed higher. It was around this time that Sterling said resignedly, "I don't worry much about the future of razor's edge Techno-punk. It will be bowdlerized and parodied and reduced to a formula, just as all other SF has been." Revolutions cannot survive this kind of total success, and at this point, whether they knew it or not (and

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most of them did not) cyberpunk as a movement was dead.

But if the factions were no more, the postmoderns remained. Everybody shifted literary position a little. Nobody, after all, was really *happy* with their labels. By now the cyberpunks had a rep as flash stylists, but weak on character, and the humanists were deemed good with people, but a trifle lacking in idea content. Both judgments were unfair, but they still left everyone wondering what to do next, and full of energy. Across the ranks, there was movement, as people stretched their literary muscles. James Patrick Kelly made an abrupt stylistic veer into the flash and pyrotechnic display of his "Cyberpunk Trilogy" (the aforementioned "Solstice," "Rat," and "The Prisoner of Chillon") and, three-piece suit or not, they were *good*. Lewis Shiner moved more and more into a lean, sinewy prose style that owed little to cyberpunk proper. Kim Stanley Robinson, whose *The Wild Shore* and *Icehenge* had both been received enthusiastically by critics and readers alike, moved on to new works (and also, temporarily, to Switzerland for reasons unrelated to science fiction). John Kessel and Bruce Sterling decided to collaborate on a story. Pat Cadigan put out a final issue of her highly regarded fanzine, *Shayol*, and went merrily on her way with her own idiosyncratic mix of fantasy and SF. Out of a clear blue sky, Rudy Rucker wrote *The Meaning of Life*, which, under its ornamentation, is a gently self-satirical look at growing up in the sixties. Sterling put his Factions stories behind him, and revealed himself as a master stylist. Many of his new works are an attempt to explore the impact of science in a way free of the technolatry characteristic of current Utopian and Distopian SF. Most significantly, perhaps, Gibson and Rowmen began a friendly literary correspondence. A belated *rapprochement* was in the works. New alliances were forming, and new constellations of writers, and they were all casting about for a new challenge. Something bigger this time.

But in the midst of all this carnage and triumph, art and defeat, something significant happened. Another postmodern

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VIEWPOINT

popped up. Lucius Shepard, whose Ace Special novel *Green Eyes* (a weird combination of biochemistry and voodoo) had been largely ignored at first, suddenly blossomed. In 1983, he had published his first story, "Solitario's Eyes." Now in 1984 he produced what seemed an endless stream of excellent stories, including the darkly savage "Salvador." By year's end, he had three stories on the Nebula ballot, and while he did not win *then,* everybody knew it was just a matter of time.

Shepard is another damned tall writer—to stand in conversation with him, Gibson, and Kessel is to guarantee a stiff neck the next morning. He wears a silver skull in one ear, and has a possibly romantic past about which everyone seems to know something, but not much. He almost certainly *has* traveled extensively about the world, to judge by the convincing quality of his varied and exotic settings. He has also met genuine lowlife—a type that SF writers often tackle, and usually miss—again by testimony of such stories as "Black Coral" and "A Traveler's Tale." Often he writes from a Third World perspective, something very few Americans dare even attempt.

What is significant to our account is that Shepard belongs in neither cyberpunk nor humanist camps. His fiction has the mean edge of the cyberpunks, and the human angle of the humanists, and yet lacks the hot tech ambiance of the one, and the defiant literariness of the other. Still, Shepard intuitively belongs with the postmoderns. So, rather than try to shoehorn him into either badly fitting label, let's just see him as symptomatic of the new surge of writers coming up from obscurity. The ground is bubbling underfoot, and new talent is climbing into the sunshine. The cutting edge is about to move on. Some who have it now will lose it, and others will keep it. Reputations will grow and dwindle. Some will almost but never quite make it. Others will linger in the shadows for years before bursting out to dazzle us all. The mighty shall be humbled, and the humble exalted. All Biblical prophesies shall be fulfilled. In short, it will be a time much like any other for

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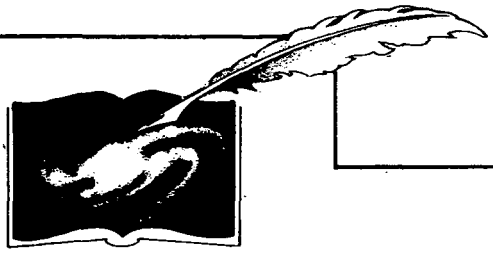

About L. RON HUBBARD's

Writers of the Future Contest

by Algis Budrys

The Writers of the Future contest substantially rewards at least twelve talented new speculative fiction writers each year. With no strings, every three months it confers prizes of $500, $750 and $1,000 for short stories or novelettes. In addition, there's an annual Master Prize of $4,000. All awards are symbolized by trophies or framed certificates, so there's something for the mantelpiece too.

There's also a Writers of the Future anthology, which I edit. (There was one last year, and there's another one just out as you read this.) It offers top rates for limited rights in the stories. These payments are in addition to any contest winnings. The anthology is distributed through top paperback book retailers everywhere, and is kept in print and on sale continually. All that's required to win or to be a finalist is a good new story, any kind of fantasy or science fiction, no more than 17,000 words long, by writers whose published fiction has been no more than three short stories or one novelette. Entry is free.

The contest deadlines in 1986 are March 31, June 30, and September 30, and there are First, Second and Third prizes for each three-month quarter. At the end of our year, a separate panel of judges awards a Master Prize to the best of the four quarterly winners. So one person will win a total of $5,000. Judging panels include or have included Gregory Benford, Stephen Goldin, Frank Herbert, Anne McCaffrey, C.L. Moore, Larry Niven, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe and Roger Zelazny, as well as me. Matters are administered so that the judges are totally independent and have the final say.

It seems hardly necessary to embellish the above facts with any enthusiastic adjectives. This contest was created and sponsored by L. Ron Hubbard and the project will continue in 1986 and try to do some realistic good for people whose talent earns them this consideration. For complete entry rules, and answers to any questions you might have, write to the address given below:

Don't Delay! Send Your Entry To:

Writers of the Future Contest
2210 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 343
Santa Monica, CA 90403

Or, you can find the rules—and examples of winning stories, plus informative essays by some of the judges—in either of the Writers of the Future anthologies. They're original paperbacks and cost $3.95 each.

Good luck.

—Algis Budrys

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science fiction.

Looking back over what I've written, I regret all the significant writers I've had to leave out in the interest of simplification. No discussion of our literary time and place would be complete, for example, without mention of the Bay Area group of Philip K. Dick disciples that includes Tim Powers, K.W. Jeter, and the infinitely strange James P. Blaylock. I've also neglected the gang of Space Cadets—the ones Omniaveritas calls "Reagan Youth"—who have accreted about the twin nuclei of Jim Baen and Jerry Pournelle. I've skipped over all the lone wolf writers for lack of a convenient niche (where does one place Jack McDevitt, Nancy Kress, Pat Murphy, or Tim Sullivan, or Greg Frost, to name just five?). Finally, and I regret this most but it was done out of ignorance rather than malice, I haven't said a word about the writers (R.A. McAvoy, John Crowley, Patricia McKillip, Michael Shea, Jane Yolen, Robin McKinley, and of course Tanith Lee) currently at work to shape the new fantasy. To all of them, and you, I apologize.

Ah, but for one dazzling instant there, it was possible to see it all: To choose up sides, name names and list lists. The lines of literary influence were exposed for all to see, bright as lasers across the literary map, running from Texas to British Columbia, from New Hampshire to North Carolina, with nexuses in Denver, in Austin, in Kansas City, in Philadelphia even, and for that single bright instant before the continents shifted, the future was laid out sparkling and clean, the roads were clear, and the gateways into brave new worlds of fiction swung wide. All of Atlantis was prosperous and at peace.

It was a terrific time to be alive and young and writing stories so good that they made the competition slam fists into walls and throw typewriters through closed windows in blind fits of jealous rage. ●

POSTSCRIPT
"Naming the Cyberpunks: A Rough Chronology"

1981. In his Best of the Year anthology, Gardner Dozois wrote of John Shirley's *City Come A-Walking* that along with recent

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works by Bruce Sterling and Nicholas Yermakov, "it seems to portend the development of a sort of 'punk SF,' developing upon a set of sensibilities that to date have been represented in SF primarily by the work of Harlan Ellison."

1983. In March, John Kessel spoke to the English Club at North Carolina State about "punk science fiction," naming Gibson and Sterling specifically. John Shirley gave a talk to the Eastern Science Fiction Association on what he called the New Movement, listing Gibson, Shiner, and Sterling. Both reported that their auditors had no idea what they were talking about. In that year's B-o-t-Y anthology, Dozois named the promising new writers of the decade, and in *Cheap Truth* Vincent Omniaveritas responded by dumping the lot into a magnetic field. Gibson, Sterling, Shiner, Cadigan, and Bear drifted to one pole, but Omniaveritas did not yet feel the need to label what they were doing. In *The Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America,* Rudy Rucker published "A Transrealist Manifesto," in which he said, "Transrealism is not so much a type of SF as it is a type of avant-garde literature. I feel that Transrealism is the only real valid approach to literature at this point in history." (But while his definition of Transrealism can be stretched to include the other cyberpunks, the suspicion lingers that Rucker is as yet the first and sole Transrealist.)

1984. Dozois, discussing the "80s generation" controversy from his previous Best of the Year anthology, parenthetically remarked, "About the closest thing here to a self-willed aesthetic 'school' would be that group of writers, purveyors of hard-edged high-tech stuff, who have on occasion been referred to as 'cyberpunks'—Sterling, Gibson, Shiner, Cadigan, Bear." On the street, a number of variants were being used. The term "techno-punk" was picked up by *The Village Voice* for a review of Gibson's *Neuromancer*. The cyberpunks themselves started using the terms Neo Classicists (the formal morph) or (among themselves) Mirrorshades Writers. (Sterling would later sell an anthology with the working title of *The Mirrorshades*

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VIEWPOINT

Manifesto—under whatever title, watch for it.)

1985. In *Warhoon,* Vincent Omniaveritas wrote an article on "The New Science Fiction." Its trademarks, he said, were technological literacy, imaginative concentration, visionary intensity, a global, twenty-first century point of view and "A fictional technique which takes the advances of the New Wave as already given, using the full range of literary craftsmanship, yet asserting the primacy of content over style and meaning over mannerism." The NASFiC (North American Science Fiction Convention) in Austin featured a cyberpunk panel with Sterling, Shiner, Cadigan, Bear, Shirley, and a moderator nobody had ever heard of. Unfortunately it ended in chaos and the chance for valuable insights was lost. Reviewing the panel in his fanzine, *REM,* Charles Platt wrote, "If the 'cyberpunks' are to be taken seriously (and certainly their writing should be) the first thing they need is a better label . . . Even a nondescript generic label such as 'modernists' would be better." But in December, Doc Kennedy titled his *Twilight Zone* book review column, "The Hard, the Soft, and the Cyberpunk," an early indication of which term was slipping into general usage.

1986. Norman Spinrad wrote a column in *IAsfm* proposing the name "Neuromantics" for a group he defined as "the so-called 'cyberpunks.' " In a letter to *Locus* decrying inaccuracy in the coverage of the cyberpunk panel, John Shirley wrote, "The writer claimed I welcomed the term 'Cyberpunk.' I denounced it as misleading. I like 'The Movement' or Spinrad's name for it, 'The Neuromantics.' " In *REM,* Rudy Rucker said that the term cyberpunk was ". . . easy to remember, and it makes you think. It's an example of efficient encoding. And the association with punks is fine with me . . . I'm proud to be a cyberpunk." On the other hand, Gibson felt ". . . . that Spinrad's term 'Neuromantics' is far more bothersome, even than Gardner's *cyberpunks.* . . ." Again in *IAsfm,* Michael Swanwick accepted the prevailing term as inevitable, and then ingenuously declared the movement dead and subsumed

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both cyberpunks and humanists into yet another group, the postmoderns.

Bruce Sterling, who has rather bemusedly been collecting the labels slapped on him, also lists outlaw technologists, and radical hard SF (the latter a term appearing in the British SF magazine *Interzone*). Ad, as he says, absurdum. But though the writers themselves say the whole question of labels grew old long ago, more and more people are discovering their work, and with it the chance for glory. The process of naming may be far from over. We may be standing on the ground floor of a critical growth industry—one with no natural limits, and nary an end in sight.

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION

CONGRATULATES THE WINNERS OF THE 1985 NEBULA AWARDS

given by the Science Fiction Writers of America:

Best Novel

Ender's Game
by Orson Scott Card
(expanded from "Ender's Game," *Analog*, August 1977)

Best Novella

"Sailing to Byzantium"
by Robert Silverberg
(*IAsfm*, February 1985)

Best Novelette

"Portraits of His Children"
by George R.R. Martin
(*IAsfm*, November 1985)

Best Short Story

"Out of All Them Bright Stars"
by Nancy Kress

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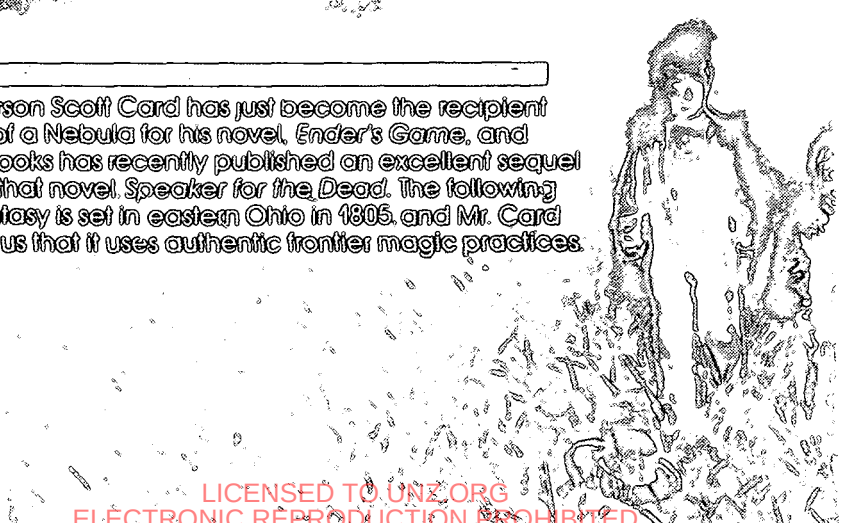
by Orson Scott Card

HATRACK RIVER

art: Nicholas Jainschigg

Orson Scott Card has just become the recipient of a Nebula for his novel, *Ender's Game*, and Tor books has recently published an excellent sequel to that novel, *Speaker for the Dead*. The following fantasy is set in eastern Ohio in 1805, and Mr. Card tells us that it uses authentic frontier magic practices.



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Little Peggy was very careful with the eggs. She rooted her hand through the straw till her fingers bumped something hard and heavy. She gave no never mind to the chicken drips. After all, Mama never even crinkled her face to open up Cally's most spetackler diapers. Even when the chicken drips were wet and stringy and made her fingers stick together, little Peggy gave no never mind. She just pushed the straw apart, wrapped her hand around the egg, and lifted it out of the brood box. All this while standing tip-toe on a wobbly stool, reaching high above her head. Mama said she was too young for egging, but little Peggy showed her. Every day she felt in every brood box and brought in every egg, every single one, that's what she did.

Every one, she said in her mind, over and over. I got to reach into every one.

Then little Peggy looked back into the northeast corner, the darkest place in the whole coop, and there sat Bloody Mary in her brood box, looking like the devil's own bad dream, hatefulness shining out of her nasty eyes, saying Come here little girl and give me nips. I want nips of finger and nips of thumb and if you come real close and try to take my egg I'll get a nip of eye from you.

Most animals didn't have much heartfire, but Bloody Mary's was strong and made a poison smoke. Nobody else could see it, but little Peggy could. Bloody Mary dreamed of death for all folks, but most specially for a certain little girl five years old, and little Peggy had the marks on her fingers to prove it. At least one mark, anyway, and even if Papa said he couldn't see it, little Peggy remembered how she got it and nobody could blame her none if she sometimes forgot to reach under Bloody Mary who sat there like a bushwhacker waiting to kill the first folks that just tried to come by. Nobody'd get mad if she just sometimes forgot to look there.

I forgot forgot forgot. I looked in every brood box, every one, and if one got missed then I forgot forgot forgot.

Everybody knew Bloody Mary was a lowdown chicken and too mean to give any eggs that wasn't rotten anyway.

I forgot.

She got the egg basket inside before Mama even had the fire het, and Mama was so pleased she let little Peggy put the eggs one by one into the cold water. Then Mama put the pot on the hook and swung it right on over the fire. Boiling eggs you didn't have to wait for the fire to slack, you could do it smoke and all.

"Peg," said Papa.

That was Mama's name, but Papa didn't say it in his Mama voice. He said it in his little-Peggy-you're-in-dutch voice, and little Peggy knew she was completely found out, and so she turned right around and yelled what she'd been planning to say all along.

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"I forgot, Papa!"

Mama turned and looked at little Peggy in surprise. Papa wasn't surprised though. He just raised an eyebrow. He was holding his hand behind his back. Little Peggy knew there was an egg in that hand. Bloody Mary's nasty egg.

"What did you forget, little Peggy?" asked Papa, talking soft.

Right that minute little Peggy reckoned she was the stupidest girl ever born on the face of the earth. Here she was denying before anybody accused her of anything.

But she wasn't going to give up, not right off like that. She couldn't stand to have them mad at her and she just wanted them to let her go away and live in England. So she put on her innocent face and said, "I don't know, Papa."

She figgered England was the best place to go live, cause England had a Lord Protector. From the look in Papa's eye, a Lord Protector was pretty much what she needed just now.

"What did you forget?" Papa asked again.

"Just say it and be done, Horace," said Mama. "If she's done wrong then she's done wrong."

"I forgot one time, Papa," said little Peggy. "She's a mean old chicken and she hates me."

Papa answered soft and slow. "One time," he said.

Then he took his hand from behind him. Only it wasn't no single egg he held, it was a whole basket. And that basket was filled with a clot of straw—most likely all the straw from Bloody Mary's box—and that straw was mashed together and glued tight with dried-up raw egg and shell bits, mixed up with about three or four chewed-up baby chicken bodies.

"Did you have to bring that in the house before breakfast, Horace?" said Mama.

"I don't know what makes me madder," said Horace. "What she done wrong or her studying up to lie about it."

"I didn't study and I didn't lie!" shouted little Peggy. Or anyways she meant to shout. What came out sounded espiciously like crying even though little Peggy had decided only yesterday that she was done with crying for the rest of her life.

"See?" said Mama. "She already feels bad."

"She feels bad being caught," said Horace. "You're too slack on her, Peg. She's got a lying spirit. I don't want my daughter growing up wicked. I'd rather see her dead like her baby sisters before I see her grow up wicked."

Little Peggy saw Mama's heartfire flare up with memory, and in front of her eyes she could see a baby laid out pretty in a little box, and then another one only not so pretty cause it was the second baby Missy, the

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one what died of pox so nobody'd touch her but her own Mama, who was still so feeble from the pox herself that she couldn't do much. Little Peggy saw that scene, and she knew Papa had made a mistake to say what he said cause Mama's face went cold even though her heartfire was hot.

"That's the wickedest thing anybody ever said in my presence," said Mama. Then she took up the basket of corruption from the table and took it outside.

"Bloody Mary bites my hand," said little Peggy.

"We'll see what bites," said Papa. "For leaving the eggs I give you one whack, because I reckon that lunatic hen looks fearsome to a frog-size girl like you. But for telling lies I give you ten whacks."

Little Peggy cried in earnest at that news. Papa gave an honest count and full measure in everything, but most especially in whacks.

Papa took the hazel rod off the high shelf. He kept it up there ever since little Peggy put the old one in the fire and burnt it right up.

"I'd rather hear a thousand hard and bitter truths from you, Daughter, than one soft and easy lie," said he, and then he bent over and laid on with the rod across her thighs. Whick whick whick, she counted every one, they stung her to the heart, each one of them, they were so full of anger. Worst of all she knew it was all unfair because his heartfire raged for a different cause altogether, and it always did. Papa's hate for wickedness always came from his most secret memory. Little Peggy didn't understand it all, because it was twisted up and confused and Papa didn't remember it right well himself. All little Peggy ever saw plain was that it was a lady and it wasn't Mama. Papa thought of that lady whenever something went wrong. When baby Missy died of nothing at all, and then the next baby also named Missy died of pox, and then the barn burnt down once, and a cow died, everything that went wrong made him think of that lady and he began to talk about how much he hated wickedness and at those times the hazel rod flew hard and sharp.

I'd rather hear a thousand hard and bitter truths, that's what he said, but little Peggy knew that there was one truth he didn't ever want to hear, and so she kept it to herself. She'd never shout it at him, even if it made him break the hazel rod, cause whenever she thought of saying aught about that lady, she kept picturing her father dead, and that was a thing she never hoped to see for real. Besides, the lady that haunted his heartfire, she didn't have no clothes on, and little Peggy knew that she'd be whipped for sure if she talked about people being naked.

So she took the whacks and cried till she could taste that her nose was running. Papa left the room right away, and Mama came back to fix up breakfast for the blacksmith and the visitors and the hands, but neither one said boo to her, just as if they didn't even notice. She cried even harder and louder for a minute, but it didn't help. Finally she picked up

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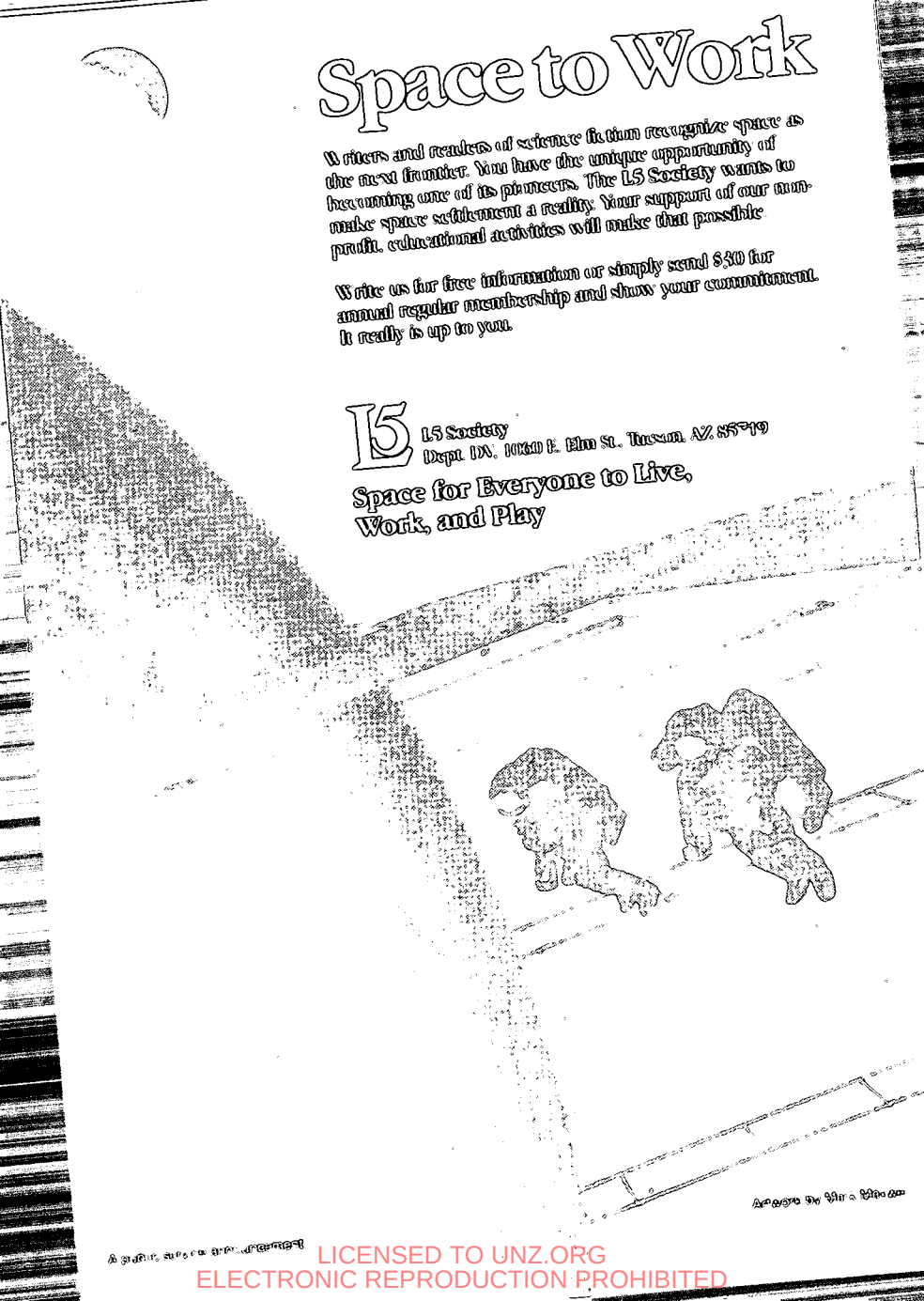

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her Bugy from the sewing basket and walked all stiff-legged out to Oldpappy's cabin and woke him right up.

He listened to her story like he always did.

"I know about Bloody Mary," he said, "and I told your papa fifty times if I told him once, wring that chicken's neck and be done. She's a crazy bird. Every week or so she gets crazy and breaks all her own eggs, even the ones ready to hatch. Kills her own chicks. It's a lunatic what kills its own."

"Papa like to killed me," said little Peggy.

"I reckon if you can walk somewhat it ain't so bad altogether."

"I can't walk much."

"No, I can see you're nigh crippled forever," said Oldpappy. "But I tell you what, the way I see it your mama and your papa's mostly mad at each other. So why don't you just disappear for a couple of hours?"

"I wish I could turn into a bird and fly."

"Next best thing, though," said Pappy, "is to have a secret place where nobody knows to look for you. Do you have a place like that? No, don't tell me—it wrecks it if you tell even a single other person. You just go to that place for a while. As long as it's a safe place, not out in the woods where a Red might take your pretty hair, and not a high place where you might fall off, and not a tiny place where you might get stuck."

"It's big and it's low and it ain't in the woods," said little Peggy.

"Then you go there, Maggie."

Little Peggy made the face she always made when Oldpappy called her that. And she held up Bugy and in Bugy's squeaky high voice she said, "Her name is Peggy."

"You go there, *Piggy*, if you like that better—"

Little Peggy slapped Bugy right across Oldpappy's knee.

"Someday Bugy'll do that once too often and have a rupture and die," said Oldpappy.

But Bugy just danced right in his face and insisted, "Not piggy, *Peggy!*"

"That's right, Puggy, you go to that secret place and if anybody says, We got to go find that girl, I'll say, I know where she is and she'll come back when she's good and ready."

Little Peggy ran for the cabin door and then stopped and turned. "Oldpappy, you're the nicest grown-up in the whole world."

"Your papa has a different view of me, but that's all tied up with another hazel rod that I laid hand on much too often. Now run along."

She stopped again right before she closed the door. "You're the *only* nice grown-up!" She shouted it real loud, halfway hoping that they could hear it clear inside the house. Then she was gone, right across the garden, out past the cow pasture, up the hill into the woods, and along the path to the spring house.

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* * *

They had one good wagon, these folks did, and two good horses pulling it. One might even suppose they was prosperous, considering they had six big boys, from mansize on down to twins that had wrestled each other into being a good deal stronger than their dozen years. Not to mention one big daughter and a whole passel of little girls. A big family. Right prosperous if you didn't know that not even a year ago they had owned a mill and lived in a big house on a streambank in west New Hampshire. Come down far in the world, they had, and this wagon was all they had left of everything. But they were hopeful, trekking west along the roads that crossed the Hio, heading for open land that was free for the taking. If you were a family with plenty of strong backs and clever hands, it'd be good land, too, as long as the weather was with them and the Reds didn't raid them and all the lawyers and bankers stayed in New England.

The father was a big man, a little run to fat, which was no surprise since millers mostly stood around all day. That softness in the belly wouldn't last a year on a deepwoods homestead. He didn't care much about that, anyway—he had no fear of hard work. What worried him today was his wife, Faith. It was her time for that baby, he knew it. Not that she'd ever talk about it direct. Women just don't speak about things like that with men. But he knew how big she was and how many months it had been. Besides, at the noon stop she murmured to him, "Alvin Miller, if there's a road house along this way, or even a little broke-down cabin, I reckon I could use a bit of rest." A man didn't have to be a philosopher to understand her. And after six sons and six daughters, he'd have to have the brains of a brick not to get the drift of how things stood with her.

So he sent the oldest boy, Vigor, to run ahead on the road and see the lay of the land.

You could tell they were from New England, 'cause the boy didn't take no gun. If there'd been a bushwhacker the young man never would've made it back, and the fact he came back with all his hair was proof no Red had spotted him—the French up Detroit way were paying for English scalps with liquor and if a Red saw a white man alone in the woods with no rifle he'd own that white man's scalp. So maybe a man could think that luck was with the family at last. But since these Yankees had no notion that the road wasn't safe, Alvin Miller didn't think for a minute of his good luck.

Vigor's word was of a road house three miles on. That was good news, except that between them and that road house was a river. Kind of a scrawny river, and the ford was shallow, but Alvin Miller had learned never to trust water. No matter how peaceful it looks, it'll reach and try to take you. He was halfway minded to tell Faith that they'd spend the

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night this side of the river, but she gave just the tiniest groan and at that moment he knew that there was no chance of that. Faith had borne him a dozen living children, but it was four years since the last one and a lot of women took it bad, having a baby so late. A lot of women died. A good road house meant women to help with the birthing, so they'd have to chance the river.

And Vigor did say the river wasn't much.

The air in the spring house was cool and heavy, dark and wet. Sometimes when little Peggy caught a nap here, she woke up gasping like as if the whole place was under water. She had dreams of water even when she wasn't here—that was one of the things that made some folks say she was a seeper instead of a torch. But when she dreamed outside, she always knew she was dreaming. Here the water was real.

Real in the drips that formed like sweat on the milkjars setting in the stream. Real in the cold damp clay of the spring house floor. Real in the swallowing sound of the stream as it hurried through the middle of the house.

Keeping it cool all summer long, cold water spilling right out of the hill and into this place, shaded all the way by trees so old the moon made a point of passing through their branches just to hear some good old tales. That was what little Peggy always came here for, even when Papa didn't hate her. Not the wetness of the air, she could do just fine without that. It was the way the fire went right out of her and she didn't have to be a torch. Didn't have to see into all the dark places where folks hid theirselfs.

From her they hid theirselfs as if it would do some good. Whatever they didn't like most about theirself they tried to tuck away in some dark corner but they didn't know how all them dark places burned in little Peggy's eyes. Even when she was so little that she spit out her corn mash 'cause she was still hoping for a suck, she knew all the stories that the folks around her kept all hid. She saw the bits of their past that they most wished they could bury, and she saw the bits of their future that they most feared.

And that was why she took to coming up here to the spring house. Here she didn't have to see those things. Not even the lady in Papa's memory. There was nothing here but the heavy wet dark cool air to quench the fire and dim the light so she could be—just for a few minutes in the day—a little five-year-old girl with a straw puppet named Bugy and not even have to *think* about any of them grown-up secrets.

I'm not wicked, she told herself. Again and again but it didn't work because she knew she was.

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All right then, she said to herself, I *am* wicked. But I won't be wicked anymore. I'll tell the truth like Papa says, or I'll say nothing at all.

Even at five years old, little Peggy knew that if she kept that vow, she'd be better off saying nothing.

So she said nothing, not even to herself, just lay there on a mossy damp table with Bugy clenched tight enough to strangle in her fist.

Ching ching ching.

Little Peggy woke up and got mad for just a minute.

Ching ching ching.

Made her mad because nobody said to her, Little Peggy, you don't mind if we talk this young blacksmith feller into settling down here, do you?

Not at all, Papa, she would've said if they'd asked. She knew what it meant to have a smithy. It meant your village would thrive, and folks from other places would come, and when they came there'd be trade, and when there was trade then her father's big house could be a forest inn, and when there was a forest inn all the roads would kind of bend a little just to pass the place, if it wasn't too far out of the way—little Peggy knew all that, as sure as the children of farmers knew the rhythms of the farm. A road house by a smithy was a road house that would prosper. So she would've said, sure enough, let him stay, deed him land, brick his chimney, feed him free, let him have my bed so I have to double up with Cousin Peter who keeps trying to peek under my nightgown, I'll put up with all that—just as long as you don't put him near the spring house so that all the time, even when I want to be alone with the water, there's that whack thump hiss roar, noise all the time, and a fire burning up the sky to turn it black, and the smell of charcoal burning. It was enough to make a body wish to follow the stream right back into the mountain just to get some peace.

Of course the stream was the smart place to put the blacksmith. Except for water, he could've put his smithy anywheres at all. The iron came to him in the shipper's wagon clear from New Netherland, and the charcoal—well, there were plenty of farmers willing to trade charcoal for a good shoe. But water, that's what the smith needed that nobody'd bring him, so of course they put him right down the hill from the spring house where his ching ching ching could wake her up and put the fire back into her in the one place where she had used to be able to let it burn low and go almost to cold wet ash.

A roar of thunder.

She was at the door in a second. Had to see the lightning. Caught just the last shadow of the light but she knew that there'd be more. It wasn't much after noon, surely, or had she slept all day? What with all these blackbelly clouds she couldn't tell—it might as well be the last minutes

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of dusk. The air was all a-prickle with lightning just waiting to flash. She knew that feeling, knew that it meant the lightning'd hit close.

She looked down to see if the blacksmith's stable was still full of horses. It was. The shoeing wasn't done, the road would turn to muck, and so the farmer with his two sons from out West Fork way was stuck here. Not a chance they'd head home in *this,* with lightning ready to put a fire in the woods, or knock a tree down on them, or maybe just smack them a good one and lay them all out dead in a circle like them five Quakers they still was talking about and here it happened back in '90 when the first white folks came to settle here. People talked still about the Circle of Five and all that, some people wondering if God up and smashed them flat so as to shut the Quakers up, seeing how nothing else ever could, while other people was wondering if God took them up into heaven like the first Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell who was smote by lightning at the age of ninety-seven and just disappeared.

No, that farmer and his big old boys'd stay another night. Little Peggy was an innkeeper's daughter, wasn't she? Papooses learnt to hunt, pickaninnies learnt to tote, farmer children learnt the weather, and an innkeeper's daughter learnt which folks would stay the night, even before they knew it right theirselfs.

Their horses were champing in the stable, snorting and warning each other about the storm. In every group of horses, little Peggy figgered, there must be one that's remarkable dumb, so all the others have to tell him what all's going on. Bad storm, they were saying. We're going to get a soaking, if the lightning don't smack us first. And the dumb one kept nickering and saying, What's the noise, what's that noise.

Then the sky just opened right up and dumped water on the earth. Stripped leaves right off the trees, it came down so hard. Came down so thick, too, that little Peggy couldn't even see the smithy for a minute and she thought maybe it got washed right away into the stream. Oldpappy told her how that stream led right down to the Hatrack River, and the Hatrack poured right into the Hio, and the Hio shoved itself on through the woods to the Mizzipy, which went on down to the sea, and Oldpappy said how the sea drank so much water that it got indigestion and gave off the biggest old belches you ever heard, and what came up was clouds. Belches from the sea, and now the smithy would float all that way, get swallered up and belched out, and someday she'd just be minding her own business and some cloud would break up and plop that smithy down as neat as you please, old Makepeace Smith still ching ching chinging away.

Then the rain slacked off a mite and she looked down to see the smithy still there. But that wasn't what she saw at all. No, what she saw was sparks of fire way off in the forest, downstream toward the Hatrack,

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down where the ford was, only there wasn't a chance of taking the ford today, with this rain. Sparks, lots of sparks, and she knew every one of them was folks. She didn't hardly think of doing it anymore, she only had to see their heartfires and she was looking close. Maybe future, maybe past, all the visions lived together in the heartfire.

What she saw right now was the same in all their hearts. A wagon in the middle of the Hatrack, with the water rising and everything they owned in all the world in that wagon.

Little Peggy didn't talk much, but everybody knew she was a torch, so they listened whenever she spoke up about trouble. Specially this kind of trouble. Sure the settlements in these parts were pretty old now, a fair bit older than little Peggy herself, but they hadn't forgotten yet that anybody's wagon caught in a flood is everybody's loss.

She fair to flew down that grassy hill, jumping gopher holes and sliding the steep places, so it wasn't twenty seconds from seeing those far-off heartfires till she was speaking right up in the smithy's shop. That farmer from West Fork at first wanted to make her wait till he was done with telling stories about worse storms he'd seen. But Makepeace knew all about little Peggy. He just listened right up and then told those boys to saddle them horses, shoes or no shoes, there was folks caught in the Hatrack ford and there was no time for foolishness. Little Peggy didn't even get a chance to see them go—Makepeace had already sent her off to the big house to fetch her father and all the hands and visitors there. Wasn't a one of them who hadn't once put all they owned in the world into a wagon and dragged it west across the mountain roads and down into the forest. Wasn't a one of them who hadn't felt a river sucking at that wagon, wanting to steal it away. They all got right to it. That's the way it was then, you see. Folks noticed other people's trouble every bit as quick as if it was their own.

Vigor led the boys in trying to push the wagon, while Eleanor hawed the horses. Alvin Miller spent his time carrying the little girls one by one to safety on the far shore. The current was a devil clawing at him, whispering, "I'll have your babies, I'll have them all," but Alvin said no, with every muscle in his body as he strained shoreward he said no to that whisper, till his girls stood all bedraggled on the bank with rain streaming down their faces like the tears from all the grief in the world.

He would have carried Faith, too, baby in her belly and all, but she wouldn't budge. Just sat inside that wagon, bracing herself against the trunks and furniture as the wagon tipped and rocked. Lightning crashed and branches broke; one of them tore the canvas and the water poured into the wagon but Faith held on with white knuckles and her eyes staring out. Alvin knew from her eyes there wasn't a thing he could say

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to make her let go. There was only one way to get Faith and her unborn baby out of that river, and that was to get the wagon out.

"Horses can't get no purchase, Papa," Vigor shouted. "They're just stumbling and bound to break a leg."

"Well we can't pull out without the horses!"

"The horses are *something,* Papa. We leave 'em in here and we'll lose wagon and horses too!"

"Your mama won't leave that wagon."

And he saw understanding in Vigor's eyes. The *things* in the wagon weren't worth a risk of death to save them. But Mama was.

"Still," he said. "On shore the team could pull strong. Here in the water they can't do a thing."

"Set the boys to unhitching them. But first tie a line to a tree to hold that wagon!"

It wasn't two minutes before the twins Wastenot and Wantnot were on the shore making the rope fast to a stout tree. David and Measure made another line fast to the rig that held the horses, while Calm cut the strands that held them to the wagon. Good boys, doing their work just right, Vigor shouting directions while Alvin could only watch helpless at the back of the wagon, looking now at Faith who was trying not to have the baby, now at the Hatrack River that was trying to push them all down to hell.

Not much of a river, Vigor had said, but then the clouds came up and the rain came down and the Hatrack became something after all. Even so it looked passable when they got to it. The horses strode in strong, and Alvin was just saying to Calm, who had the reins, "Well, we made it not a minute to spare," when the river went insane. It doubled in speed and strength all in a moment, and the horses got panicky and lost direction and started pulling against each other. The boys all hopped into the river and tried to lead them to shore but by then the wagon's momentum had been lost and the wheels were mired up and stuck fast. Almost as if the river knew they were coming and saved up its worst fury till they were already in it and couldn't get away.

"Look out! Look out!" screamed Measure from the shore.

Alvin looked upstream to see what devilment the river had in mind, and there was a whole tree floating down the river, endwise like a battering ram, the root end pointed at the center of the wagon, straight at the place where Faith was sitting, her baby on the verge of birth. Alvin couldn't think of anything to do, couldn't think at all, just screamed his wife's name with all his strength. Maybe in his heart he thought that by holding her name on his lips he could keep her alive, but there was no hope of that, no hope at all.

Except that Vigor didn't know there was no hope. Vigor leapt out when

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the tree was no more than a rod away, his body falling against it just above the root. The momentum of his leap turned it a little, then rolled it over, rolled it and turned it away from the wagon. Of course Vigor rolled with it, pulled right under the water—but it worked, the root end of the tree missed the wagon entirely, and the shaft of the trunk struck it a sidewise blow.

The tree bounded across the stream and smashed up against a boulder on the bank. Alvin was five rods off, but in his memory from then on, he always saw it like as if he'd been right there. The tree crashing into the boulder, and Vigor between them. Just a split second that lasted a lifetime, Vigor's eyes wide with surprise, blood already leaping out of his mouth, spattering out onto the tree that killed him. Then the Hatrack River swept the tree out into the current. Vigor slipped under the water, all except his arm, all tangled in the roots, which stuck up into the air for all the world like a neighbor waving good-bye after a visit.

Alvin was so intent on watching his dying son that he didn't even notice what was happening to his own self. The blow from the tree was enough to dislodge the mired wheels, and the current picked up the wagon, carried it downstream, Alvin clinging to the tailgate, Faith weeping inside, Eleanor screaming her lungs out from the driver's seat, and the boys on the bank shouting something. Shouting "Hold! Hold! Hold!"

The rope held, one end tied to a strong tree, the other end tied to the wagon, it held. The river couldn't tumble the wagon downstream; instead it swung the wagon in to shore the way a boy swings a rock on a string, and when it came to a shuddering stop it was right against the bank, the front end facing upstream.

"It held!" cried the boys.

"Thank God!" shouted Eleanor.

"The baby's coming," whispered Faith.

But Alvin, all he could hear was the single faint cry that had been the last sound from the throat of his firstborn son, all he could see was the way his boy clung to the tree as it rolled and rolled in the water, and all he could say was a single word, a single command. "Live," he murmured. Vigor had always obeyed him before. Hard worker, willing companion, more a friend or brother than a son. But this time he knew his son would disobey. Still he whispered it. "Live."

"Are we safe?" said Faith, her voice trembling.

Alvin turned to face her, tried to strike the grief from his face. No sense her knowing the price that Vigor paid to save her and the baby. Time enough to learn of that after the baby was born. "Can you climb out of the wagon?"

"What's wrong?" asked Faith, looking at his face.

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"I took a fright. Tree could have killed us. Can you climb out, now that we're up against the bank?"

Eleanor leaned in from the front of the wagon. "David and Calm are on the bank, they can help you up. The rope's holding, Mama, but who can say how long?"

"Go on, Mother, just a step," said Alvin. "We'll do better with the wagon if we know you're safe on shore."

"The baby's coming," said Faith.

"Better on shore than here," said Alvin sharply. "Go *now*."

Faith stood up, clambered awkwardly to the front. Alvin climbed through the wagon behind her, to help her if she should stumble. Even he could see how her belly had dropped. The baby must be grabbing for air already.

On the bank it wasn't just David and Calm, now. There were strangers, big men, and several horses. Even one small wagon, and that was a welcome sight. Alvin had no notion who these men were, or how they knew to come and help, but there wasn't a moment to waste on introductions. "You men! Is there a midwife in the road house?"

"Goody Guester does with birthing," said a man. A big man, with arms like oxlegs. A blacksmith, surely.

"Can you take my wife in that wagon? There's not a moment to spare." Alvin knew it was a shameful thing, for men to speak so openly of birthing, right in front of the woman who was set to bear. But Faith was no fool—she knew what mattered most, and getting her to a bed and a competent midwife was more important than pussyfooting around about it.

David and Calm were careful as they helped their mother toward the waiting wagon. Faith was staggering with pain. Women in labor shouldn't have to step from a wagon seat up onto a riverbank, that was sure. Eleanor was right behind her, taking charge as if she wasn't younger than all the boys except the twins. "Measure! Get the girls together. They're riding in the wagon with us. You too, Wastenot and Wantnot! I know you can help the big boys but I need you to watch the girls while I'm with Mother." Eleanor was never one to be trifled with, and the gravity of the situation was such that they didn't even call her Eleanor of Aquitaine as they obeyed. Even the little girls mostly gave over their squabbling and got right in.

Eleanor paused a moment on the bank and looked back to where her father stood on the wagon seat. She glanced downstream, then looked back at him. Alvin understood the question, and he shook his head no. Faith was not to know of Vigor's sacrifice. Tears came unwelcome to Alvin's eyes, but not to Eleanor's. Eleanor was only fourteen, but when she didn't want to cry, she didn't cry.

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Wastenot hawed the horse and the little wagon lurched forward, Faith wincing as the girls patted her and the rain poured. Faith's gaze was somber as a cow's, and as mindless, looking back at her husband, back at the river. At times like birthing, Alvin thought, a woman becomes a beast, slack-minded as her body takes over and does its work. How else could she bear the pain? As if the soul of the earth possessed her the way it owns the souls of animals, making her part of the life of the whole world, unhitching her from family, from husband, from all the reins of the human race, leading her into the valley of ripeness and harvest and reaping and bloody death.

"She'll be safe now," the blacksmith said. "And we have horses here to pull your wagon out."

"It's slacking off," said Measure. "The rain is less, and the current's not so strong."

"As soon as your wife stepped ashore, it eased up," said the farmer-looking feller. "The rain's dying, that's sure."

"You took the worst of it in the water," said the blacksmith. "But you're all right now. Get hold of yourself, man, there's work to do."

Only then did Alvin come to himself enough to realize that he was crying. Work to do, that's right, get hold of yourself, Alvin Miller. You're no weakling, to bawl like a baby. Other men have lost a dozen children and still live their lives. You've had twelve, and Vigor lived to be a man, though he never did get to marry and have children of his own. Maybe Alvin had to weep because Vigor died so nobly; maybe he cried because it was so sudden.

David touched the blacksmith's arm. "Leave him be for a minute," he said softly. "Our oldest brother was carried off not ten minutes back. He got tangled in a tree floating down."

"It wasn't no *tangle*," Alvin said sharply. "He jumped that tree and saved our wagon, and your mother inside it! That river paid him back, that's what it did, it punished him."

Calm spoke quietly to the local men. "It run him up against that boulder there." They all looked. There was a smear of blood on the rock.

"The Hatrack has a mean streak in it," said the blacksmith, "but I never seen this river so riled up before. I'm sorry about your boy. There's a slow, flat place downstream where he's bound to fetch up. Everything the river catches ends up there. When the storm lets up, we can go down and bring back the—bring him back."

Alvin wiped his eyes on his sleeve, but since his sleeve was soaking wet it didn't do much good. "Give me a minute more and I can pull my weight," said Alvin.

They hitched two more horses and the four beasts had no trouble pulling the wagon out against the much weakened current. By the time

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the wagon was set to rights again on the road; the sun was even breaking through.

"Wouldn't you know," said the blacksmith. "If you ever don't like the weather hereabouts, you just set a spell, cause it'll change."

"Not this one," said Alvin. "This storm was laid in wait for us."

The blacksmith put an arm across Alvin's shoulder, and spoke real gentle. "No offense, mister, but that's crazy talk."

Alvin shrugged him off. "That storm and that river wanted us."

"Papa," said David, "you're tired and grieving. Best be still till we get to the road house and see how Mama is."

"My baby is a boy," said Papa. "You'll see. He would have been the seventh son of a seventh son."

That got their attention, right enough, that blacksmith and the other men as well. Everybody knew a seventh son had certain gifts, but the seventh son of a seventh son was about as powerful a birth as you could have.

"That makes a difference," said the blacksmith. "He'd have been a born douser, sure, and water hates that." The others nodded sagely.

"The water had its way," said Alvin. "Had its way, and all done. It would've killed Faith and the baby, if it could. But since it couldn't, why, it killed my boy Vigor. And now when the baby comes, he'll be the sixth son, cause I'll only have five living."

"Some says it makes no difference if the first six be alive or not," said a farmer.

Alvin said nothing, but he knew it made all the difference. He had thought this baby would be a miracle child, but the river had taken care of that. If water don't stop you one way, it stops you another. He shouldn't have hoped for a miracle child. The cost was too high. All his eyes could see, all the way home, was Vigor dangling in the grasp of the roots, tumbling through the current like a leaf caught up in a dust devil, with the blood seeping from his mouth to slake the murderous thirst of the Hatrack.

Little Peggy stood in the window, looking out into the storm. She could see all those heartfires, especially one, one so bright it was like the sun when she looked at it. But there was a blackness all around them. No, not even black—a nothingness, like a part of the universe God hadn't finished making, and it swept around those lights as if to tear them from each other, sweep them away, swallow them up. Little Peggy knew what that nothingness was. Those times when her eyes saw the hot yellow heartfires, there were three other colors, too. The rich dark orange of the earth. The thin gray color of the air. And the deep black emptiness of water. It was the water that tore at them now. The river, only she had

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never seen it so black, so strong, so terrible. The heartfires were so tiny in the night.

"What do you see, child?" asked Oldpappy.

"The river's going to carry them away," said little Peggy.

"I hope not."

Little Peggy began to cry.

"There, child," said Oldpappy. "It ain't always such a grand thing to see afar off like that, is it."

She shook her head.

"But maybe it won't happen as bad as you think."

Just at that moment, she saw one of the heartfires break away and tumble off into the dark. "Oh!" she cried out, reaching as if her hand could snatch the light and put it back. But of course she couldn't. Her vision was long and clear, but her reach was short.

"Are they lost?" asked Oldpappy.

"One," whispered little Peggy.

"Haven't Makepeace and the others got there yet?"

"Just now," she said. "The rope held. They're safe now."

Oldpappy didn't ask her how she knew, or what she saw. Just patted her shoulder. "Because you told them. Remember that, Margaret. One was lost, but if you hadn't seen and sent help, they might all have died."

She shook her head. "I should've seen them sooner, Oldpappy, but I fell asleep."

"And you blame youself?" asked Oldpappy.

"I should've let Bloody Mary nip me, and then father wouldn't've been mad, and then I wouldn't've been in the spring house, and then I wouldn't've been asleep, and then I would've sent help in time—"

"We can all make daisy chains of blame like that, Maggie. It don't mean a thing."

But she knew it meant something. You don't blame blind people 'cause they don't warn you you're about to step on a snake—but you sure blame somebody with eyes who doesn't say a word about it. She knew her duty ever since she first realized that other folks couldn't see all that she could see. God gave her special eyes, so she'd better see and give warning, or the devil would take her soul. The devil or the deep black sea.

"Don't mean a thing," Oldpappy murmured. Then, like he just been poked in the behind with a ramrod, he went all straight and said, "Spring house! Spring house, of course." He pulled her close. "Listen to me, little Peggy. It wasn't none of your fault, and that's the truth. The same water that runs in the Hatrack flows in the spring house brook, it's all the same water, all through the world. The same water that wanted them dead, it knew you could give warning and send help. So it sang to you and sent you off to sleep."

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It make a kind of sense to her, it sure did. "How can that be, Oldpappy?"

"Oh, that's just in the nature of it. The whole universe is made of only four kinds of stuff, little Peggy, and each one wants to have its own way." Peggy thought of the four colors that she saw when the heartfires glowed, and she knew what all four were even as Oldpappy named them. "Fire makes things hot and bright and uses them up. Air makes things cool and sneaks in everywhere. Earth makes things solid and sturdy, so they'll last. But water, it tears things down, it falls from the sky and carries off everything it can, carries it off and down to the sea. If the water had its way, the whole world would be smooth, just a big ocean with nothing out of the water's reach. All dead and smooth. That's why you slept. The water wants to tear down these strangers, whoever they are, tear them down and kill them. It's a miracle you woke up at all."

"The blacksmith's hammer woke me," said little Peggy.

"That's it, then, you see? The blacksmith was working with iron, the hardest earth, and with a fierce blast of air from the bellows, and with a fire so hot it burns the grass outside the chimney. The water couldn't touch him to keep him still."

Little Peggy could hardly believe it, but it must be so. The blacksmith had drawn her from a watery sleep. The smith had *helped* her. Why, it was enough to make you laugh, to know the blacksmith was her friend this time.

There was shouting on the porch downstairs, and doors opened and closed. "Some folks is here already," said Oldpappy.

Little Peggy saw the heartfires downstairs, and found the one with the strongest fear and pain. "It's their Mama," said little Peggy. "She's got a baby coming."

"Well, if that ain't the luck of it. Lose one, and here already is a baby to replace death with life." Oldpappy shambled on out to go downstairs and help.

Little Peggy, though, she just stood there, looking at what she saw in the distance. That lost heartfire wasn't lost at all, and that was sure. She could see it burning away far off, despite how the darkness of the river tried to cover it. He wasn't dead, just carried off, and maybe somebody could help him. She ran out then, passed Oldpappy all in a rush, clattered down the stairs.

Mama caught her by the arm as she was running into the great room. "There's a birthing," Mama said, "and we need you."

"But Mama, the one that went downriver, he's still alive!"

"Peggy, we got no time for—"

Two boys with the same face pushed their way into the conversation. "The one downriver!" cried one.

"Still alive!" cried another.

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"How do you know!"

"He can't be!"

They spoke so all on top of each other that Mama had to hush them up just to hear them. "It was Vigor, our big brother, he got swept away—"

"Well he's alive," said little Peggy, "but the river's got him."

The twins looked to Mama for confirmation. "She know what she's talking about, Goody Guester?"

Mama nodded, and the boys raced for the door, shouting, "He's alive! He's still alive!"

"Are you sure?" asked Mama fiercely. "It's a cruel thing, to put hope in their hearts like that, if it ain't so."

Mama's flashing eyes made little Peggy afraid, and she couldn't think what to say.

By then, though, Oldpappy had come up from behind. "Now Peg," he said, "how would she know one was taken by the river, lessun she saw?"

"I know," said Mama. "But this woman's been holding off birth too long, and I got a care for the baby, so come on now, little Peggy, I need you to tell me what you see."

She led little Peggy into the bedroom off the kitchen, the place where Papa and Mama slept whenever there were visitors. The woman lay on the bed, holding tight to the hand of a tall girl with deep and solemn eyes. Little Peggy didn't know their faces, but she recognized their fires, especially the mother's pain and fear.

"Someone was shouting," whispered the mother.

"Hush now," said Mama.

"About him still alive."

The solemn girl raised her eyebrows, looked at Mama. "Is that so, Goody Guester?"

"My daughter is a torch. That's why I brung her here in this room. To see the baby."

"Did she see my boy? Is he alive?"

"I thought you didn't tell her, Eleanor," said Mama.

The solemn girl shook her head.

"Saw from the wagon. Is he alive?"

"Tell her, Margaret," said Mama.

Little Peggy turned and looked for his heartfire. There were no walls when it came to this kind of seeing. His flame was still there, though she knew it was afar off. This time, though, she drew near in the way she had, took a close look. "He's in the water. He's all tangled in the roots."

"Vigor!" cried the mother on the bed.

"The river wants him. The river says, Die, die."

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Mama touched the woman's arm. "The twins have gone off to tell the others. There'll be a search party."

"In the dark!" whispered the woman scornfully.

Little Peggy spoke again. "He's saying a prayer, I think. He's saying—seventh son."

"Seventh son," whispered Eleanor.

"What does that mean?" asked Mama.

"If this baby's a boy," said Eleanor, "and he's born while Vigor's still alive, then he's the seventh son of a seventh son, and all of them alive."

Mama gasped. "No wonder the river—" she said. No need to finish the thought. Instead she took little Peggy's hands and led her to the woman on the bed. "Look at this baby, and see what you see."

Little Peggy had done this before, of course. It was the chief use they had for torches, to have them look at an unborn baby just at the birthing time. Partly to see how it lay in the womb, but also because sometimes a torch could see who the baby was, what it would be, could tell stories of times to come. Even before she touched the woman's belly, she could see the baby's heartfire. It was the one that she had seen before, that burned so hot and bright that it was like the sun and the moon, to compare it to the mother's fire. "It's a boy," she said.

"Then let me bear this baby," said the mother. "Let him breathe while Vigor still breathes!"

"How's the baby set?" asked Mama.

"Just right," said little Peggy.

"Head first? Face down?"

Little Peggy nodded.

"Then why won't it come?" demanded Mama.

"She's been telling him not to," said Little Peggy, looking at the mother.

"In the wagon," the mother said. "He was coming, and I did a beseeching."

"Well, you should have told me right off," said Mama sharply. "Speck me to help you and you don't even tell me he's got a beseeching on him. You, girl!"

Several young ones were standing near the wall, wide-eyed, and they didn't know which one she meant.

"Any of you, I need that iron key from the ring on the wall."

The biggest of them took it clumsily from the hook and brought it, ring and all. Mama dangled the large ring and the key over the mother's belly, chanting softly,

"Here's the circle, open wide,
Here's the key to get outside,
Earth be iron, flame be fair,
Fall from water into air."

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The mother cried out in sudden agony. Mama tossed away the key, cast back the sheet, lifted the woman's knees, and ordered little Peggy fiercely to *see*.

Little Peggy touched the woman's womb. The boy's mind was empty, except for a feeling of pressure and gathering cold as he emerged into the air. But the very emptiness of his mind let her see things that would never be clearly visible again. The billion billion paths of his life lay open before him, waiting for his first choices, for the first changes in the world around him to eliminate a million futures every second. The future was there in everyone, a flickering shadow that was never visible behind the thoughts of the present moment; but here, for a few precious moments, little Peggy could see them clearly.

And what she saw was death down every path. Drowning, drowning, every path of his future led this child to a watery death.

"Why do you hate him so!" cried little Peggy.

"What?" demanded Eleanor.

"Hush," said Mama. "Let her see what she sees."

Inside the unborn child, the dark blot of water that surrounded his heartfire seemed so terribly strong that little Peggy was afraid he would be swallowed up.

"Get him out to breathe!" shouted little Peggy.

Mama reached in, even though it tore the mother something dreadful, and hooked the baby by the neck with strong fingers, drawing him out.

In that moment, the dark water retreated inside the child's mind, and just before the first breath came, little Peggy saw ten million deaths by water disappear. Now, for the first time, there were some paths open, some paths leading to a dazzling future. And all the paths that did not end in early death had one thing in common. On all those paths, little Peggy saw herself doing one simple thing.

So she did that thing. She took her hands from the slackening belly and ducked under her mother's arm. The baby's head had just emerged, and it was still covered with a bloody caul, a scrap of the sac of soft skin in which he had floated in his mother's womb.

His mouth was open, sucking inward on the caul, but it didn't break, and he couldn't breathe.

Little Peggy did what she had seen herself do in the baby's future. She reached out, took the caul from under the baby's chin, and pulled it away from his face. It came whole, in one moist piece, and in the moment it came away, the baby's mouth cleared, he sucked in a great breath, and then gave that mewling cry that birthing mothers hear as the song of life.

Little Peggy folded the caul, her mind still full of the visions she had seen down the pathways of this baby's life. She did not know yet what

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the visions meant, but they made such clear pictures in her mind that she knew she would never forget them. They made her afraid, because so much would depend on her, and how she used the birth caul that was still warm in her hands.

"A boy," said Mama.

"Is he," whispered the mother. "Seventh son?"

Mama was tying the cord, so she couldn't spare a glance at little Peggy. "Look," she whispered.

Little Peggy looked for the single heartfire on the distant river. "Yes," she said, for the heartfire was still burning.

Even as she watched, it flickered, died.

"Now he's gone," said little Peggy.

The woman on the bed wept bitterly, her birth-wracked body shuddering.

"Grieving at the baby's birth," said Mama. "It's a dreadful thing."

"Hush," whispered Eleanor to her mother. "Be joyous, or it'll darken the baby all his life!"

"Vigor," murmured the woman.

"Better nothing at all than tears," said Mama. She held out the crying baby, and Eleanor took it in competent arms—she had cradled many a babe before, it was plain. Mama went to the table in the corner and took the scarf that had been blacked in the wool, so it was night-colored clear through. She dragged it slowly across the weeping woman's face, saying, "Sleep, Mother, sleep."

When the cloth came away, the weeping was done, and the woman slept, her strength spent.

"Take the baby from the room," said Mama.

"Don't he need to start his sucking?" asked Eleanor.

"She'll never nurse this babe," said Mama. "Not unless you want him to suck hate."

"She can't hate him," said Eleanor. "It ain't his fault."

"I reckon her milk don't know that," said Mama. "That right, little Peggy? What teat did the baby suck?"

"His mama's," said little Peggy.

Mama looked sharp at her. "You sure of that?"

She nodded.

"Well, then, we'll bring the baby in when she wakes up. He doesn't need to eat anything for the first night, anyway." So Eleanor carried the baby out into the great room, where the fire burned to dry the men, who stopped trading stories about rains and floods worse than this one long enough to look at the baby and admire.

Inside the room, though, Mama took little Peggy by the chin and stared

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hard into her eyes. "You tell me the truth, Margaret. It's a serious thing, for a baby to suck on its mama and drink up hate."

"She won't hate him, Mama," said little Peggy.

"What did you see?"

Little Peggy would have answered, but she didn't know the words to tell most of the things she saw. So she looked at the floor. She could tell from Mama's quick draw of breath that she was ripe for a tongue-lashing. But Mama waited, and then her hand came soft, stroking across little Peggy's cheek. "Ah, child, what a day you've had. The baby might have died, except you told me to pull it out. You even reached in and opened up its mouth—that's what you did, isn't it?"

Little Peggy nodded.

"Enough for a little girl, enough for one day." Mama turned to the other girls, the ones in wet dresses, leaning against the wall. "And you, too, you've had enough of a day. Come out of here, let your mama sleep, come out and get dry by the fire. I'll start a supper for you, I will."

But Oldpappy was already in the kitchen, fussing around, and refused to hear of Mama doing a thing. Soon enough she was out with the baby, shooing the men away so she could rock it to sleep, letting it suck her finger.

Little Peggy figured after a while that she wouldn't be missed, and so she snuck up the stairs to the attic ladder, and up the ladder into the lightless, musty space. The spiders didn't bother her much, and the cats mostly kept the mice away, so she wasn't afraid. She crawled right to her secret hiding place and took out the carven box that Oldpappy had given her, the one he said his own papa brought from Ulster when he came to the colonies. It was full of the precious scraps of childhood—stones, strings, buttons—but now she knew that these were nothing compared to the work before her all the rest of her life. She dumped them right out, and blew into the box to clear away dust. Then she laid the folded caul inside and closed the lid.

She knew that in the future she would open that box a dozen times. That it would call to her, wake her from her sleep, tear her from her friends, and steal from her all her dreams. All because a baby boy downstairs had no future at all, except a death from the dark water, excepting if she used that caul to keep him safe, the way it once protected him in the womb.

For a moment she was angry, to have her own life so changed. Worse than the blacksmith coming, it was, worse than Papa and the hazel wand he whupped her with, worse than Mama when her eyes were angry. Everything would be different forever and it wasn't fair. Just for a baby she never invited, never asked to come here, what did she care about any old baby?

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She reached out and opened the box, planning to take the caul and cast it into a dark corner of the attic. But even in the darkness, she could see a place where it was darker still: near her heartfire, where the emptiness of the deep black river was all set to make a murderer out of her.

Not me, she said to the water. You ain't part of me.

Yes I am, whispered the water. I'm all through you, and you'd dry up and die without me.

You ain't the boss of me, anyway, she retorted.

She closed the lid on the box and skidded her way down the ladder. Papa always said that she'd get splinters in her butt doing that. This time he was right. It stung something fierce, so she walked kind of sideways into the kitchen where Oldpappy was. Sure enough, he stopped his cooking long enough to pry the splinters out.

"My eyes ain't sharp enough for this, Maggie," he complained.

"You got the eyes of an eagle. Papa says so."

Oldpappy chuckled. "Does he now."

"What's for dinner?"

"Oh, you'll like this dinner, Maggie."

Little Peggy wrinkled up her nose. "Smells like chicken."

"That's right."

"I don't like chicken soup."

"Not just soup, Maggie. This one's a-roasting, except the neck and wings."

"I hate *roast* chicken, too."

"Does your Oldpappy ever lie to you?"

"Nope."

"Then you best believe me when I tell you this is one chicken dinner that'll make you *glad*. Can't you think of any way that a partickler chicken dinner could make you glad?"

Little Peggy thought and thought, and then she smiled. "Bloody Mary?"

Oldpappy winked. "I always said that was a hen born to make gravy."

Little Peggy hugged him so tight that he made choking sounds, and then they laughed and laughed.

Later that night, long after little Peggy was in bed, they brought Vigor's body home, and Papa and Makepeace set to making a box for him. Alvin Miller hardly looked alive, even when Eleanor showed him the baby. Until she said, "That torch girl. She says that this baby is the seventh son of a seventh son."

Alvin looked around for someone to tell him if it was true.

"Oh, you can trust her," said Mama.

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Tears came fresh to Alvin's eyes. "That boy hung on," he said. "There in the water, he hung on long enough."

"He knowed what store you set by that," said Eleanor.

Then Alvin reached for the baby, held him tight, looked down into his eyes. "Nobody named him yet, did they?" he asked.

"Course not," said Eleanor. "Mama named all the other boys, but you always said the seventh son'd have—"

"My own name. Alvin. Seventh son of a seventh son, with the same name as his father. Alvin Junior." He looked around him, then turned to face toward the river, way off in the nighttime forest. "Hear that, you Hatrack River? His name is Alvin, and you didn't kill him after all."

Soon they brought in the box, and laid out Vigor's body with candles, to stand for the fire of life that had left him. Alvin held up the baby, over the coffin. "Look on your brother," he whispered to the infant.

"That baby can't see nothing yet, Papa," said David.

"That ain't so, David," said Alvin. "He don't *know* what he's seeing, but his eyes can see. And when he gets old enough to hear the story of his birth, I'm going to tell him that his own eyes saw his brother Vigor, who gave his life for this baby's sake."

It was two weeks before Faith was well enough to travel. But Alvin saw to it that he and his boys worked hard for their keep. They cleared a good spot of land, chopped the winter's firewood, set some charcoal heaps for Makepeace Smith, and widened the road. They also felled four big trees and made a strong bridge across the Hatrack River, a covered bridge so that even in a rainstorm people could cross that river without a drop of water touching them.

Vigor's grave was the third one there, beside little Peggy's two dead sisters. The family paid respects and prayed there on the morning that they left. Then they got in their wagon and rode off westward. "But we leave a part of ourselves here always," said Faith, and Alvin nodded.

Little Peggy watched them go, then ran up into the attic, opened the box, and held little Alvin's caul in her hand. No danger, for now at least. Safe for now. She put the caul away and closed the lid. You better be something, baby Alvin, she said, or else you caused a powerful lot of trouble for nothing. ●

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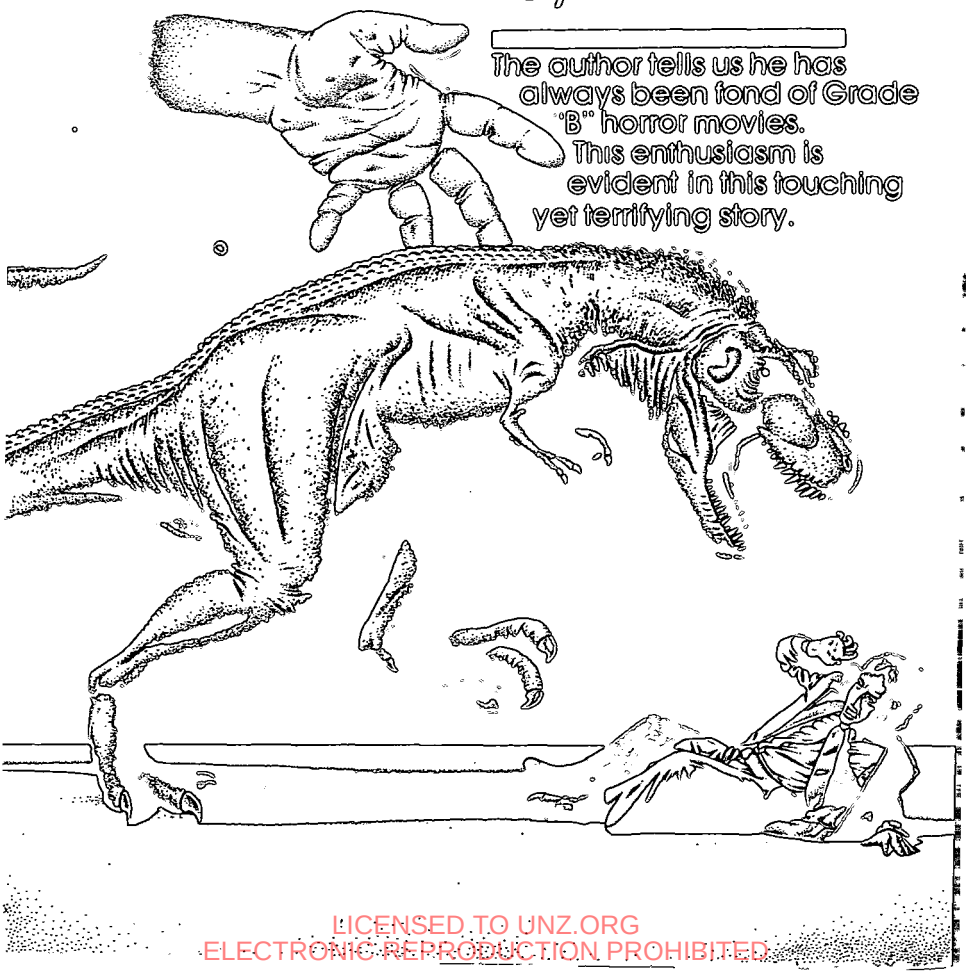
STOP-MOTION

art: Bob Walters

by Tim Sullivan

The author tells us he has always been fond of Grade "B" horror movies. This enthusiasm is evident in this touching yet terrifying story.



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The front end of an oncoming car loomed suddenly out of the fog, gleaming in the glare of Kevin Burtt's headlights like the snout of a prehistoric monster.

Kevin swerved to avoid it, thinking only of saving his mother's precious Toyota Celica. He struggled to keep the Celica on the road as its tires screeched, trying to turn the wheel first one way, then the other. A pack of matches shot across the dash. Centrifugal forces crushed him against the door, and a horn honked angrily behind him. The Celica fishtailed between two cars. Kevin was pretty sure he'd had it, but he somehow missed them, turning in the direction in which he was swerving. It seemed as if the worst were over.

At that moment, a dog ran in front of the Celica.

Kevin didn't feel the impact, but he heard the dog's piping yips as it was struck, mingling with the shriek of his tires on the pavement. There was a sound like rain on a tin roof, gravel churned up against the Celica's undercarriage. He shut his eyes tight, expecting to run off the road into the woods or a ditch, but the car came to a complete stop on the gravel shoulder. Headlights washed over the Celica's interior, as car horns dopplered into the distance and vanished. All at once, it was quiet and dark.

For quite some time, Kevin sat still, smelling burnt rubber. His heart was thudding in his chest and his breathing was ragged. His fingers ached from the death grip he held on the wheel. He sat there staring into the woods through the windshield, marveling that he was still alive.

Then he remembered the dog.

Kevin forced himself to move. It took some effort to open the car door, but he did it. He stood up, his knees feeling like silly putty, and stepped shakily out onto the shoulder, looking for the dog. The car was entirely off the road, angling towards the black pines of the forest, safe enough for the moment.

When he didn't find the dog right away, he tried to convince himself that he hadn't hit it after all. It wasn't here, was it? So it must have run away. It had yipped because it was frightened . . . that was all.

But then what was that he heard *now*, a counterpoint to the singing of the frogs and crickets? Something in the woods? No, not in the woods. Nearer. . . .

A deafening bleat made him jump away from the road. A semi hurtled past him like a frightened diplodocus, with a blast of noise and light. In a few moments it was gone, the night swallowing up its fading roar.

It was dark again, and silent.

Kevin listened for the sound he'd picked up just before the truck roared by. There it was again, closer than the night creatures calling in the dark: the dog's pathetic whining.

He felt his way toward the sound.

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And almost tripped over the injured dog. It lay on the gravel on its side. Kneeling over it, he slowly stretched out his right hand to touch the soft fur. His fingers met with something hot and wet instead. He jerked his hand away.

The dog whimpered, trying to lift its bloody head.

"It's gonna be all right, fella," he said, knowing that it wasn't. His eyes grew more accustomed to the dark as he stroked the dog's head. Most of the blood seemed to be coming from its hind quarters, the legs twisted horribly like a child's botched sculpture.

The dog seemed to be unconscious, and Kevin fully expected it to die while he knelt there petting it. After several more cars passed by on the lonely road, it occurred to him that this could take a long time. Maybe he should drive to a phone and call the humane society, or somebody. He wished he could do something to help, but he didn't want to leave the dog alone. It might die while he was gone, and then he would feel rotten.

The best thing to do was take the dog with him.

Pulling off his jacket, Kevin covered the dog and slipped his hands underneath it. The dog yelped in agony as he lifted it, an unnervingly human sound that hurt his ears. He winced. The dog cradled in his arms, he staggered back to the car and fumbled with the passenger door. His fingers were slippery with blood, but somehow he got it open.

He carefully placed the dog on the seat, for the first time getting a good look at it under the dome light. It was a yellow mutt with short hair; not the kind that would win first prize in a dog show, maybe, but a nice enough pet for a kid. He would have loved a dog like this, but his mom had never let him keep one. Too much trouble.

"Well, you're coming home with me tonight," Kevin said, sliding into the driver's seat, "whether she likes it or not."

As he started up the motor, Kevin felt relieved. It was a creepy place, the dark woods just a few yards away, and he was glad to get out of there. The dog must have come from the woods. . . . It wasn't wearing a collar. Maybe it was wild. Wild or not, it was clear to him where his responsibility lay. He had hurt the dog . . . probably killed it. It was up to him to watch over it until it died. He didn't know why exactly. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

He pulled onto the highway and drove towards home, never once going over the speed limit and carefully obeying all the traffic signs. The last thing he wanted was a cop stopping him. In only a few minutes he was pulling into his driveway.

Shutting off the motor, he cut the lights and waited for a moment before opening the car door.

His mom was probably in bed. She'd told him she was tired before he

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left for the midnight monster movie, and it was after three now. She was almost certainly asleep.

He tried not to make any noise as he got out and went around to the other side of the carport to get the dog. The blood on his fingers was dry now. There was more blood caked on the latch on the passenger's side, but it was easy to open the door quietly. The dog was very still, he was afraid it was already dead.

As he touched it, the dog's head snaked around, bloodstained teeth bared in a feral grimace. It snapped at him, barely missing his hand.

"Jesus!" Kevin recoiled in horror. He hadn't thought the dog had the strength—or the temperament—to try to bite him. The dog's head slumped back onto the car seat, and Kevin heard its labored breathing. After a few seconds, he gingerly reached in and touched it again. It didn't try to bite him again, and it didn't yelp or whine, either. Too weak by now, most likely.

Kevin placed his right foot against the car door and shoved it shut. He held the dog against his chest and carried it around to the back door. Then he paused.

Shit, why hadn't he thought to unlock the door first? Now he'd have to put the dog down while he searched his pockets for the key he had pulled out of the ignition a minute ago. How stupid.

Maybe he could sort of juggle the dog while he searched. . . . He tried that, but the dog began to gasp alarmingly.

Kevin set the dog down on the dewy grass. It took him only a second to unlock the door. Gently, he picked the dog up again and stepped into the house. It was dark inside, only the dim glow of a night light shining through the kitchen door and illuminating the hallway. His bedroom and his mother's were upstairs, but he had no intention of going up there.

Walking very slowly, he made his way through the silent house. The floorboards in the hall creaked unnervingly beneath the soles of his sneakers, but the burgundy carpet in the living room muffled his footsteps. He carried the dog through to the other side of the house, to the basement door.

His arms were sore from cradling the dog, but he didn't put it down this time, somehow managing to work the doorknob between thumb and forefinger. He flicked the wall switch, and clambered slowly down the stairs.

Kevin took the dog into the basement and laid it before his Tyrannosaurus Rex. Light from an overhead bulb brought the eighteen-inch-high dinosaur into sharp relief. Perched on its shelf like a pagan idol, it looked as if it might spring at any moment.

The dog lay bleeding on a canvas dropcloth that he used to catch stray bits of clay, paint, and latex when he constructed his monsters. He petted

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the blood-stiffened fur, noticing for the first time just how badly soaked with blood his jacket and pants were. It was weird to think that this brownish, crusty stuff that had ruined his clothes was what the dog needed in order to live. Kevin made his creatures move on film through the laborious process of stop-motion animation, but they weren't *really* alive. They stared down at him now from their shelves, posed for action yet still, lifelike but lifeless. Bug-eyed aliens, anthropomorphic frogs, giant insects . . . and, of course, the dinosaurs: horned, beaked triceratops; deinonychus, with its thumblike claws for tearing its victims' flesh; armor-plated stegosaurus; sinuous, serpentine apatosaurus. . . .

And best of all, Tyrannosaurus Rex. It was made of textured latex skin stretched over sponge-rubber muscles and a metal skeleton, with long porcelain fangs and red glass eyes that gleamed in the light of the naked bulb.

Kevin shivered, suddenly hit by the uncanniness of the situation. His hands had brought these creatures to life—on celluloid at least—and here they all were, silently watching as the life ran out of this real, flesh-and-blood creature. . . .

The dog wheezed. Kevin studied the grotesquely bent back, the rear legs hanging lifelessly from the broken hips. He was reminded of the time that his cousin Susie had knocked a model on the floor before the epoxy was dry. It had never been quite right after that, no matter how much he'd worked on it. He had finally been forced to scrap it, but he'd been able to use much of it as an armature. At the time, it had almost seemed as if the spirit of the first model had been transported to the second.

"It would be neat if I could do that for *you*," he whispered, lying down next to the dog. Imagine if he could preserve the dog's spirit in one of his creatures! It would have to be the tyrannosaur, the grandest of them all. He would keep the dog's spirit in the dinosaur while he went out and bought some ball-and-socket joints for a steel armature, some foam rubber for the musculature, molded latex for the skin, acrylic paint, glue-on fur . . . and then he could make a *new* dog. He would set the new dog under the lights and move it by the tiniest of increments, snapping each movement a frame at a time. Once the film was processed, he would thread it through the projector, switch it on . . . and the dog would come back to life!

But only if the tyrannosaur would give up the dog's soul.

He could almost feel the dinosaur's baleful gaze on him now. It seemed to be watching him, watching the dog, waiting for the poor little mutt to die.

Funny about the tyrannosaur. It looked just as nasty as the day he'd finished building it, the first thing he'd made after the hunting accident

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that had killed his father. It had pissed him off the way his mother cried all the time and got tranked to the eyeballs, the way everybody acted. He was even pissed off at his dad, sort of, for getting himself killed in that stupid, pointless kind of way. It wasn't fair. He couldn't wait until the funeral was over, so he could come home and throw himself into his work. Building the tyrannosaurus. He had sweated away at it night and day, his mother too stoned to bitch about the weird hours he was keeping. He hadn't stopped until it was finished, a work of art, the best model he'd ever built, and then he'd started right in on some footage of the tyrannosaurus "moving" through a meticulously created swamp setting he'd been working on for months before his dad died. He had the other dinosaurs, dozens of them that he'd been been building for seven years, since he was eleven; he had the tabletop swamp, he had the kleig lights and the old secondhand 16mm camera . . . and he had the tyrannosaurus. So he made a film.

He had even managed to talk his mom into helping him pay for getting the film processed. . . . But it was odd. He'd never looked at it. On the day he brought the processed film home from the lab, he'd put it in a drawer and gone to sleep for fourteen hours, exhausted to his very bones.

The next day, he had just forgotten about it. Funny. He hadn't thought about that film in weeks, months even, until Mr. Hoyt had called yesterday to remind him of this afternoon's appointment with a film producer. It was weird that he could just *forget* about something like that, after putting so much work into it.

Suddenly he was tired, very tired. He fought off a shuddering yawn. He really should get some sleep.

But there was no way he was going to leave the dog. He stretched out on the dropcloth next to it. He'd rest a little, but he wouldn't leave. His face was only inches from the dying animal's now. He stared into the glazing eyes, struggling to stay awake, his own eyes closing, the rich and terrible odor of blood clinging to him as he fell away from the world into unconsciousness. The dog was whimpering softly. The last thing Kevin saw before he spiraled down into sleep was that terrible, reptilian head looming over the dog, its yellow-fanged jaws agape as if drinking the animal's soul. . . .

His dream ended as a voice called to him from some distant place. Gradually that place came nearer, and he was *there* . . . though at first he didn't recognize where "there" was.

His face was pressed against something foul and scratchy. It was the dog. He was lying against the dying dog. . . . only it wasn't dying anymore. It was *dead*. While he dreamed that the tyrannosaurus was swallowing its soul, the dog had finally died. It was as if he had *sacrificed*

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it to the dinosaur . . . lying here on the floor with the little, furry corpse, in front of the savage god he had fashioned with his own hands.

The metallic odor of blood filled his nose and mouth.

"Kevin, I was scared to *death*," his mother was saying from the stairs. "I found blood on the back door. I . . . I thought it was yours at first."

Kevin propped himself up on one elbow. "It's okay, Mom."

"Is that dog dead?" she asked, like a small child.

Kevin looked away from her. "Yes, I ran over it last night."

"Oh, *Kevin*." Her voice sounded accusing, rather than sympathetic. "The car? . . ."

"The car's all right," he replied, trying not to show anger. "This dog ran in front of the car, and I couldn't avoid hitting it without having an accident."

"Why did you have to bring it here?"

He was beginning to feel a familiar hatred for her now, the way she was standing there gaping at him in her housecoat. He didn't answer her.

"Well?" Her tone was demanding.

"It was *dying*." Somehow the words calmed his rage, made him want to share his feelings with her. But he knew it wouldn't work. She would just act dumb, or bitchy, pretending she didn't understand what he was saying, acting like he was a great disappointment to her . . . and *her* drunk or stoned all the time.

"I've never seen such a mess in my life," she said. "Why didn't you just leave the dog there?"

"Oh, *Mom*."

"Okay, then why didn't you call the humane society, or the police, or the fire department? Why did you bring it *here?*"

"Because I didn't want it to die alone out there on that highway, okay?" His voice was rising.

"No, Kevin, it's not okay." She put her hands on her temples. "Oh, God, and I haven't even seen the car yet. I can just imagine what the damage is like."

"The car's all right," he said, getting to his feet. "If you'll just leave me alone I'll bury the dog and clean up your precious carpet and the car and anything else the poor thing had the nerve to bleed on."

"If you've got an appointment at eleven, you'd better hurry," his mother said, turning to go back upstairs.

He watched her go up, and then turned to pick up the dog. He didn't look at the tyrannosaur, but somehow he could tell it was watching him. He hefted the dog and started up the stairs, still avoiding the dinosaur's eyes. The dog didn't feel like an animal at all now. It was stiff, as though it were made of wood with paintbrush bristles on the outside.

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Kevin buried the dog in the garden, working hard, his body waking up as he thrust the spade point into the soft earth and turned it over again and again. When the grave was about three feet deep and three feet long—half the size of a human grave, but big enough for a dog—Kevin lifted the dog for the last time and gently laid it in the makeshift grave. It was still wrapped in his jacket, only the back paws visible, grotesquely twisted to one side. At least it was through suffering, Kevin reasoned, feeling a curious lack of emotion now. He had never killed anything before. It was strange how much easier it was to kill things than it was to bring them to life on the screen. . . .

Working quickly, he filled the shallow grave and patted the dirt down with the flat of the spade. His mother was watching him from the kitchen.

Ignoring her, he found a bucket and some sponges, and, scrubbing with a cold fury, spent a half-hour cleaning bloodstains from the car and the hallway. He hesitated in front of the basement door, but then muttered "Screw it," and put the cleaning stuff away. Anything downstairs he would take care of later. Somehow he didn't think he could face going down there again, not just yet. Besides, if he didn't hurry, he was going to be late.

Kevin went up to his bedroom, undressed under his poster of *The Golem*, and padded down the hall to the shower. As he soaped himself and tried to scrub off the stink of death, he thought about what he was going to say to Mr. Raymond. He tried to imagine himself joking with the guy and acting sophisticated, but he knew it wouldn't work. All he could hope for was a break.

Kevin blew his hair dry and shaved. He splashed on some cologne and threw on his new boots, a pair of slacks and a striped shirt. Should he wear a tie?

"Why not?" He selected a black leather one, his favorite, passing over the white satin one with the Japanese flag on it, and the dull ones his relatives had given him for his birthday and for Christmas.

His mother was letting him use the car again today, since it was her day off and she didn't really need it. Kevin was downstairs and out the door, fumbling with the car keys, before he realized he'd forgotten the reel. Dashing back inside, he took the stairs two at a time.

He hesitated for a moment before opening the bottom drawer of his dresser, where he'd put the film months ago. There wasn't time to be spooked, though, not today. He pulled the drawer open and shoved socks and underwear aside until his fingertips met with cold metal. Back downstairs and out the door in seconds, he unlocked the car and set theprecious reel on the passenger seat while he started up the engine.

He backed out of the driveway and cruised to the stop sign on the corner, sweaty hands clutching the wheel. He was finally going to get

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a chance to show his film to an honest-to-god movie producer, but he wondered if he would make it on time.

Downtown, it seemed as if he came to a stop light on every corner, but he slowly made progress in the creeping traffic. And then he saw it. 6613 River Street was a towering, black glass edifice, newer than most of the other downtown buildings. There was no place to park, of course, so he had to keep driving right on by it, cursing and hammering on the steering wheel in frustration.

It cost him precious minutes to find a public lot. By the time he was parked and out on the sidewalk, it was already eleven. He was going to be late! In near panic, he ran across the street. A black Chevy swerved around him, the driver leaning on the horn and cursing Kevin for crossing against the light.

Terrified, Kevin sprinted all the way back to 6613 River Street. Inside the lobby, he lost more time checking the office directory, but finally found it. Brad Raymond Prods., Inc. Seventeenth floor.

The elevator seemed to take an eternity to come, and another eternity or two to creep up to the seventeenth floor. By the time the elevator doors finally opened, he was so nervous that he practically leaped out into the hallway, almost losing his balance on the slick tiles.

The receptionist glanced curiously up at him for a second, then looked down at her switchboard again. A sign on the wall behind her said *Brad Raymond Prods., Inc.*, in big, gold letters surrounded by a moire pattern. It all looked pretty classy, especially for an independent producer. This was no small-time operation.

Kevin walked up to the receptionist, hoping that she hadn't noticed that he'd almost fallen down, hoping that she couldn't hear his loud and ragged breathing, or smell the sweat cooling on his body in the air conditioning. He clutched the reel protectively against his chest and waited for her to speak to him. She was on the phone when a buzzer began to sound repeatedly on her desk. Immediately, she put the party she was talking to on hold and answered the insistent buzzer.

"Yes, Mr. Raymond," she said. "I'll take care of it."

She hung up and looked at Kevin. "May I help you?" she asked skeptically. She was a plain woman, unsmiling, thin-lipped, of about forty.

"I've come to see Mr. Raymond," he said, embarrassed to hear his own voice squeak. "I have an appointment."

The receptionist checked a little file box on her desk and picked up the phone. She pressed the same button that had been buzzing angrily at her a moment ago and mumbled something into the receiver.

"Go right in," she said. "Office at the end of the hall."

Kevin croaked his thanks and turned, walking stiffly over the plush,

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purple carpet until he came to a door with Brad Raymond's name painted on the frosted glass. He tapped lightly on the door, took a deep breath and entered.

Brad Raymond was sitting behind a big, walnut desk. He was a lean, tanned man in his early fifties, with thinning, short brown hair. His blue, three-piece suit looked very expensive. There was a picture of a pretty woman and a baby on his desk, and a lot of official-looking papers spread out in front of him on a big green blotter. He smiled, showing white, perfect teeth, and stood up, extending his right hand.

"So you're Kevin Burtt," he said in a voice like a TV announcer's, coming around his desk and squeezing Kevin's hand so hard that it hurt.

Kevin said nothing, not knowing how to respond. He just nodded.

"Harry Hoyt told me all about the work you did at his studio," Brad Raymond went on. "He says you're a real *wunderkind*."

"Mr. Hoyt's been nice to me," Kevin said, wincing to hear how preposterously high-pitched his voice was compared to Raymond's deep, rich tones.

Raymond took him by the elbow and turned him toward a projector.

"Well, why waste time, Kevin?" he said. "Why don't we thread the film and take a look at it right now?"

"I'll do it, Mr. Raymond."

"Call me Brad." Raymond slapped him on the back and steered him toward the projector. "Go right ahead and do it if you want to, Kevin."

Glad to have something to do, Kevin removed the film from the can for the first time. As he clamped the reel into place and fit the leader into the sprockets, Raymond asked him what his experience was besides working for Mr. Hoyt at Film Art.

"Just shorts and commercials," Kevin said. "No features."

"And that's what it's all about, Kevin. Features. Full-length movies that are seen by millions of people. I might be a humble independent producer, but I released five horror pictures last year, and most of a sixth is in the can right now."

"Who did the special effects?" Kevin asked.

"Oh, different people. Maybe *you'll* work on the next one." He smiled warmly. "We always like to give young talent a chance."

"It's ready," Kevin said.

Raymond drew the blinds, and the decaying buildings on the river vanished. Kevin hit the switch and a square of light appeared on a screen on the far side of the room.

"I've got a solid twenty minutes of special effects footage," Kevin said, while the leader counted down to the Mesozoic.

Once the film started, Kevin relaxed as the office was obscured in the dim light and a more intense reality appeared on the screen. *His* reality.

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There was no sound as the camera prowled the still swamps of Kevin's imagination. It was hard to believe that Brad Raymond could see it too, but there he was, staring at it, flickering light playing over his handsome face.

An ornithomimus darted across the swamp, birdlike, and a triceratops lumbered past it through the primeval ooze. Rising steam parted before the foreshortened approach of the three-horned behemoth. It threatened to charge right out of the screen, huge dragonflies skittering out of its way. Even without music and sound effects, this was a dynamite scene.

Trees crashed silently to the ground as a colossal, yet lithe figure burst from the jungle bordering the swamp. Red eyes flashing with wicked intent, yellow butcher-knife fangs gnashing, the tyrannosaurus made its grand entrance.

The triceratops raised its head, beaked mouth agape. Hackles rose on its enemy's back.

"*Fur?*" Brad Raymond shouted. "The damn thing's got *fur*?"

Kevin was shocked by the venom in Raymond's tone. He had seemed like such a nice guy up to now. Maybe if he explained. . . .

"It's scientifically plausible," Kevin said. "I thought it would make the scene more . . ."

"Plausible, shmausible," Raymond snarled. There was a grumpy pause, the only sound in the room the whir of the projector, and then, in a placating tone, Raymond said, "We're in the *entertainment* business, Kevin. People are used to scaly dinosaurs. We're not working for the Smithsonian. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah." It meant that all his research was a waste of time, as far as Brad Raymond was concerned. Well, the guy *was* a pro. . . .

The two saurians circled each other on the screen now, jaws yawning in great, silent roars. They closed in combat, the carnivore leaping onto the horned vegetarian's back. As they rolled over in the muck, the ground appeared to shake. Kevin was proud of this effect, which he achieved by moving the camera up and down in sync with the animation. Now, seeing it for the first time, he congratulated himself on its breathtaking realism.

"It's jerky," Brad Raymond said.

Kevin's heart fluttered like a pterodactyl's wing. Raymond had just uttered the words a stop-motion animator fears the most. *It's jerky.*

"Just between you and me, Kevin," Raymond said, "that's what's always wrong with this kind of animation, unless you use a computer."

So give me a computer, the words shrieked inside Kevin's skull, *and I'll see what I can do.* The dinosaurs raged on screen, accompanied by the soft susurrations of the film feeding through the projector.

"I appreciate the work you've put into this, Kevin," Raymond said, "but it just isn't state-of-the-art."

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Kevin felt like running out of the room crying, but he couldn't move. He just stood there in the dark, staring at the screen without really seeing anything.

"All right," Raymond said. "I guess I've seen enough. Shut it off."

Kevin could barely force himself to comply. Slowly, he stretched out a reluctant finger and switched off the film.

The tyrannosaur was caught in freeze frame, glaring down as furiously as it had in the basement last night. Then the projector bulb went out, and the diabolical image was gone. The spell was broken.

The dark office was quiet for a long moment, and then Brad said: "I'd like to show your film to a distributor, Kevin."

After an awkward pause, Kevin said, "Did I hear you right? You want to use my stuff?"

"Let's put it this way," Raymond replied. "Willis O'Brien is dead, I can't afford Ray Harryhausen, so maybe your material will do. I don't know . . . but I *do* know that we've got to act fast. I've got a potential backer on the line, and we've gotta reel him in before he gets away. Why don't you leave the film with me, and we'll see what happens."

Kevin hesitated, not wanting to part with the film. It was the only print in existence, after all. "I don't know. I really shouldn't let this film out of my sight . . ."

"Kevin," Brad Raymond said patiently, teeth gleaming in the dim light, "I'd *like* to work with you, but if we don't get cracking on this deal we might lose it. If you aren't ready, then I'll just have to find someone else."

The guy *was* giving him a break . . . and it *was* his own fault that he didn't have a copy. "Okay," Kevin said, rewinding the film and putting it back in the can. "You can take it for now."

"Terrific," Raymond said as Kevin handed him the reel. "Don't worry, Kevin, I'll get some copies made . . . and a videotape."

Kevin nodded, feeling very foolish for getting himself into this situation.

Brad Raymond set the reel down on his desk with a proprietary air, and shook hands with Kevin firmly. He smiled a big, warm smile. "I'll let you know what develops," he said, and winked.

Kevin smiled dutifully at the pun, but he knew that he was being dismissed. He started toward the door, stopping only long enough to say, "Take good care of my film."

"Like it was my own," Raymond said. "A few weeks, no more than a couple of months, and we'll have a distributor. Just go home and relax, Kevin. I'll do all the work from here on in."

"Yeah." On his way out to the elevator, Kevin hardly saw or heard

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anything, except for the repeated buzzing of the intercom on the receptionist's desk. The sound followed him out like an angry hornet.

Spring passed, and an agonizingly hot summer. Snapdragons grew over the dog's grave and then wilted. It had been a long time since Kevin had heard from Brad Raymond. The last time he had spoken to the producer, he'd been told there was a "package deal" in the offing, and was instructed to be patient. That was over two months ago. Kevin was no longer optimistic. He couldn't sleep at night, and he could no longer force himself to eat more than a few token bites of anything. His stomach hurt all the time now, and he frequently felt dizzy, as if the whole world were tilting slowly and ponderously, first one way and then the other. He'd always been obsessively neat, but now he just didn't seem to care about any of that stuff anymore, and he rarely bathed or changed his clothes or even brushed his teeth, unless his mother really got after him about it. He'd never been real popular in school anyway, too quiet and self-absorbed, but now even the few friends he'd had started to avoid him. Girls had begun to whisper to each other and giggle when he passed them in the corridor. A few of the class clowns had even started to call him "Norman Bates," and tell loud jokes about mad slashers and butcher-knives and chainsaws. He didn't care. It didn't seem to matter anymore.

He took one last look at the dying snapdragons, and backed away from the window. It was getting dark, and he had work to do, building an elf puppet for Mr. Hoyt. There was a movie on at midnight he wanted to catch, something that might have some animation in it. Maybe he could mess with the puppet until then.

He didn't, though. Instead, he ate one or two bites of a sandwich and read a book, never going near the basement. He hardly ever went down in the basement anymore. His mother swore it wasn't true, but there was a *smell* down there now, an awful smell. Like the dog was still down there, rotting. And the tyrannosaur was always staring at him, as if it expected something from him, as if it expected him to do something. But what?

His head hurt. He just couldn't face going down there anymore, couldn't bear having those awful glass eyes staring at him . . . The way things were going, he would have to start working in the kitchen, or maybe up in his room . . .

When it was almost twelve, he warmed up the TV. Ever since he had noticed this movie listed in the cable guide, he'd wanted to see it. It had apparently been released directly to cable; at least, Kevin had never heard of it . . . and the date in the guide was this year. *Prehistoric Monster* was the title.

Judging from the credits, it wasn't Japanese. Blood-dripping titles

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announced a nonentity cast of hokey-sounding Anglo names. It was the final credit that almost made him jump off the sofa, though. Produced, directed—and special effects!—by Brad Raymond. . . .

The story was one of those quasi-*King Kong* things about an island where dinosaurs still roam. It looked more like Florida than an island in the East Indies, the leading man couldn't act, and the part for the beautiful lady scientist was ludicrous. Nevertheless, he never took his eyes off the screen.

And then the monster appeared. A papier-mâché head lurching from between two palm fronds, vaguely resembling a tyrannosaurus. An extra was placed in the mouth of the fake head, rivers of blood pouring out. Definitely an R rating.

It was just a dumb Godzilla head, though, not what he was afraid of at all. Kevin was amused now, as a scouting expedition searched for the extra's killer. The actors cowered behind a tree as dinosaurs were sighted, ominous music with a rock beat thudded on the sound track.

The scene cut to a swamp. Completely different film stock, and a shockingly familiar look to the miniature set.

"No," Kevin whispered.

But it was true. An ornithomimus darted across the screen, getting out of the way of a triceratops who lumbered through the swamp. A blood-chilling roar, and then a menacing figure emerged from the jungle edging the morass. It was the tyrannosaurus, there on the television screen. *His* tyrannosaurus.

Kevin had seen enough. He plucked the remote control off the hassock in front of him and stabbed at it wildly with his index finger until the picture shrank into a tiny rainbow point and winked out. He sat there staring at the blank screen, numbed by what he had just seen, trying to understand how Brad Raymond could do this to him. Raymond had taken his painstaking special effects and spliced them into this awful film, a diamond gleaming in a pile of shit. No wonder his calls hadn't been returned lately.

This footage had been conjured up out of him in response to his father's death, and now it had been stolen. It was as if Raymond had gone to the graveyard and dug up his father's corpse to get his gold cufflinks.

He sat by himself for a long time in the dark, thinking about that, and wondering why he couldn't cry.

As the morning light slowly filtered into the living room, he heard his mother stirring, coming down the stairs.

"What are you doing up so early, Kevin?"

"I couldn't sleep," he said. "That guy stole my *film*."

"What? What guy?"

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"Brad Raymond. He stole my film and spliced it into this turkey he sold to cable. I saw it last night."

His mother looked confused. She had enough trouble making it to work in the morning, without having to face his problem with Brad Raymond. "Well . . . what are you gonna do, honey?"

"Sue him."

"Sue him?" She sat down in a chair opposite him, smoothing her skirt over her knees. "Kevin, we don't have enough money to hire a lawyer."

"But we can't lose."

"Are you sure? How are you going to prove he stole it? Do you have a contract?"

"No."

"You'd have to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he stole it. Don't you see? He's got enough money to hire the best lawyers."

"I don't care . . . I can't just let him get away with it."

"Forget it, Kevin. This animation business will never be anything more than a hobby. There's no future in it. You've got to get into college, study computers . . . something with a future. You're so bright, darling . . . And now that your father is gone . . ."

"Don't you understand?" Kevin said, the tears coming at last. "This film was *made* for my father."

She stared at him, her make-up not quite hiding the dark circles under her eyes, wrinkles showing through the powder. He finally saw that she would never understand the magic in his hands . . . that she never could.

She started to get up, moving toward him to comfort him, but he held up his palm. "I'll be all right," he said.

"Well," she said after a few seconds, "I better get to work."

There was no need to hurt her. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, Mom."

"That's okay, dear." She crossed the room and kissed him on the cheek. "I know you're upset, but it's all part of growing up."

She went out the front door. A moment later he heard the Toyota's engine turn over. Growing up. That was something he didn't want to do, if it meant he'd end up like her . . . or like Brad Raymond.

His mother was wrong. There *was* a way he could prove Raymond had stolen his work. The model tyrannosaur was his evidence that the special effects footage was his. How could he have gotten hold of the dinosaur if he hadn't made the film?

Yeah, that was it. He would track Raymond down and confront him with this one incontrovertible fact. The dinosaur was in *his* possession, and that was something any judge or jury would understand, no matter how many hot-shot lawyers Raymond hired.

For the first time in weeks, he opened the basement door. A flood of graveyard stink assailed his nostrils. He shook his head to clear it away,

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hesitating at the top of the stairs and peering down into the gloom. He didn't want to go down there, but he *had* to get the tyrannosaur. All that stuff about lawyers and evidence was just a rationalization. He could never stand up to a sleek meat-eater like Brad Raymond alone . . . that was the real reason why he had to take the tyrannosaur with him. Fight fire with fire, pit one savage carnivore against another. This was not rational, of course . . . not *grown up*. Nevertheless, he had to take it with him.

Almost a full minute passed before he moved. At last, he took the first step down. It creaked as he put his weight on it. Step by step, he descended into the dark basement.

It was here with him, in the darkness. He could *feel* it. He could feel the tyrant king's rage pounding like a murderous heartbeat in the dark, seeming to shake the dank, sweaty basement walls. Slowly, he reached out and pulled the chain that turned on the overhead lightbulb.

There it was, glaring at him like some savage and alien god. Its eyes were crimson fire. It seemed to quiver as it crouched there on the shelf, as if it were about to leap down, tearing and biting and rending . . . But it would never attack *him*. He had been wrong to be afraid of it. He was its *creator*, after all. Its ferocity was his own, a terrible burden he had somehow transferred to it, all his animal rage, the endless gnawing resentment . . . It had consumed the soul of the dying, maddened dog, the soul he'd sacrificed to it, bringing it fully to life, and now it was sustained by his own impotent rage. It *was* that rage, given form and substance, somehow poured into this terrible little eighteen-inch latex monster. . . .

He moved nearer to the tyrannosaur, breathing its dreadful smell, its thick graveyard fetor. His fingers trembled as he stretched out his hand toward it. He hesitated again, staring into its blazing eyes. Then he took a deep breath and reached out for it through the shadows.

His fingertips pressed against the tyrannosaur's belly. A surge of pure hatred passed through him like an electric current, and all at once it was as if he had been shifted into another gear, everything suddenly smooth and sure and certain.

Kevin took the monster down from its altar, its power a living thing in his hands. He placed it in a cardboard box and closed the flaps over its hideous face. The death stench clung to him as he took the box upstairs. Carefully, he carried it outside, to the bus stop.

The bus came fairly soon, since it was still rush hour. Kevin got on and took a seat in the back. He didn't pay much attention to the commuters, the usual assortment of shapes, colors, and clothing. An old black woman clambered onto the bus and took the seat next to him. She paid

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no attention to Kevin, and got off a few minutes later. Nobody else sat by him until the bus was downtown.

Kevin got off the bus, hands clutching the box. The other passengers had not sensed the evil that throbbed within the box, not even the old lady who'd sat next to him, but then they were innocent people, to whom the dinosaur was harmless. It knew as well as Kevin who had wronged him.

He started to walk. He didn't know this part of the city very well, but he could see that the streets sloped down towards the river. He walked fast, striding purposefully past the winos, the hookers, the pimps. A few minutes later, he hit River Street, only four blocks from Raymond's office. He crossed the street at the next corner, and two minutes later he was in the lobby. The elevator door opened and he got on.

As he rode up to the seventeenth floor, Kevin thought he felt the box moving, moving in his hands, as if something inside was trying to get out . . .

When the elevator door opened, Kevin heard the buzzer rasping impatiently.

The receptionist stared at him dubiously as he approached her. "May I help you?" she said, wrinkling her nose distastefully.

"I'm here to see Mr. Raymond," Kevin said in a cold, flat voice.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No . . . but he'll know what it's about."

She glanced at the cardboard box. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Raymond hasn't come in yet."

Even as she spoke, the intercom sounded, buzzing in a staccato rhythm, as though someone were stabbing at the button over and over again. He could tell who it was by the way the receptionist jumped to attention.

"Raymond," he said, with grim satisfaction.

"No, sir," the receptionist lied without missing a beat, "that's security."

Not bothering to reply, Kevin turned and marched down the carpeted corridor.

"You can't go in there," the receptionist cried in a voice somewhere between commanding and panicky. "Young man, I said you can't go *in* there."

He paid no attention to her squawking. Pressing the box against his heart, Kevin walked briskly to Raymond's office, and opened the door.

Inside, the light from a desk lamp reflected on Raymond's glittering, reptilian eyes. Raymond seemed amused when he saw who was intruding on him. He picked up the phone and drummed his index finger sharply on one of the intercom buttons. Kevin could hear a faint buzzing from the outer office.

"Jan," Raymond said, "no calls for a while."

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He hung up the handset and looked up. "What can I do for you, Kevin?" he asked.

"You stole my film," Kevin said.

Raymond *tsk-tsk*ed him as if he were a naughty child. "That's quite an accusation."

"It's the truth."

"Oh, really?"

"Really. You ripped off the thing that's most important to me in the whole universe, and you gave yourself credit for doing my effects."

"Your effects? I guess you haven't seen any of the trade magazines this month, have you? With the stories about my new method of animation?"

"There's nothing new in it. Stop-motion has been around as long as there've been movies. But if you *really* want something nobody's ever seen before, I've got it right here." He held out the box.

"What have you got in there, Kevin? An H-Bomb?"

"No, something better than that. It's the tyrannosaur."

Silence for several seconds, and then: "The model?"

"Yes, the model."

"But why are you giving it to me?" Raymond asked supiciously.

"Because it belongs to you."

"Well, well." Raymond broke into a broad grin. He was as self-assured as ever. "I knew you'd come to your senses and return it to its rightful owner. That's why I didn't contact the authorities."

"You don't have to play-act," Kevin said, "I'm not recording this conversation."

Raymond's right eyebrow raised quizzically. "You're just giving it to me, no questions asked?"

"That's right."

"Kid, you're out of your fucking mind."

"I know," Kevin said. "That's what makes it work."

"Makes what work?"

"The magic."

"Ri-i-i-i-ight." Raymond leaned forward, reaching for the box. "Save your space-case rap for the junior prom, kid."

The box seemed to quiver and shake impatiently in Kevin's hands. Calmly, he handed it to Raymond. An uneasy expression seemed to flicker across the producer's handsome face for a moment as he took the box in his hands, but then he set it down on his big walnut desk, and was smiling again.

Raymond sat back, beaming with self-satisfaction, as if he had already convinced himself that he had tricked Kevin into bringing the tyrannosaur to him.

"Time for you to go, Kevin," Raymond said.

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Obediently, Kevin turned and left the office, not even saying goodbye. As he walked along the carpeted corridor, he noticed that the death odor was gone from him now, replaced by the familiar smell of his unwashed body.

He nodded politely to the receptionist on his way out.

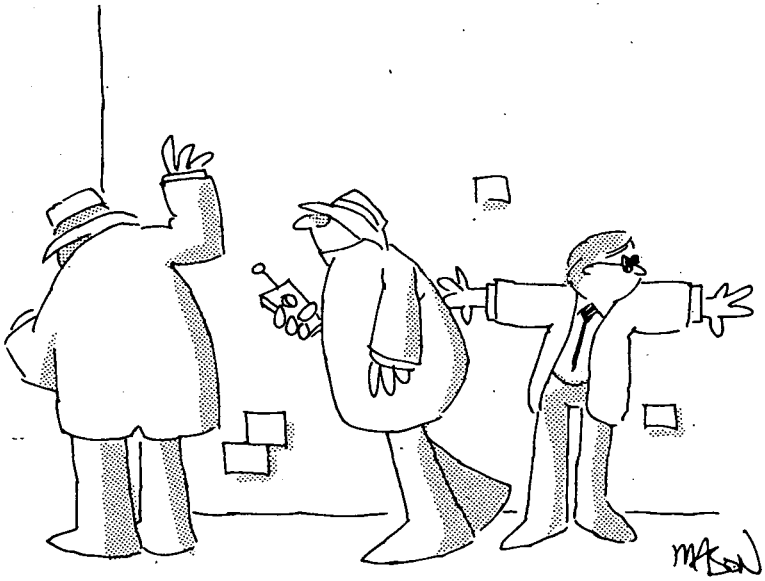
"I'm sorry if I upset you when I came in," he said to her, "but I had to make sure Mr. Raymond got the package I was carrying. He's probably opening it right now."

She stared at him blankly. Exhilarated, he pushed the button for the elevator. It came a moment later, and he stepped inside it.

The receptionist's intercom began to buzz frantically.

The last thing Kevin heard, as he pushed the button for the lobby, was that the short staccato buzzing—irritating as a dentist's drill—had suddenly become an unbroken insectile drone that went on and on and *on*, as if someone was holding the button down . . . or was lying slumped against it. . . .

Then the elevator door closed, cutting off the noise forever, and he went down. ●



CANCER CAUSING AGENTS

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(from page 19)

SOLUTION TO 987654321

9. 987654321 is a multiple of 9 and therefore is a composite (nonprime) number. The fastest way to determine if a number is divisible by 9 is to add all its digits, then add the digits in the sum, and continue until only one digit remains. The number is divisible by 9 if and only if this final digit, called the "digital root" of the original number, is 9. The digits of 987654321 add to 45, and 4 and 5 make 9, therefore the original number is a multiple of 9.

No number starting with 9 and continuing with repetitions of the descending sequence 98765432198765. . . . (we can stop the sequence at any point) can be prime. This is not true of the ascending sequence. The smallest ascending prime is 1234567891. The largest such prime known is obtained by carrying the ascending sequence through 70 digits! For more about "consecutive digit primes" see my *Magic Numbers of Dr. Matrix*, Chapter 20.

8. All factorials greater than 1! have 2 as a factor and therefore must be even. All factorials greater than 5! must end in 0. Indeed, the number of zeros at the end, as factorials grow in size, steadily increases. Each criterion shows at once that 987654321 cannot be a factorial.

7. A number is a multiple of 4 if and only if its last two digits make a number evenly divisible by 4. Because 21 is not divisible by 4, our gigantic number is not divisible by 4.

6. Any number divisible by 6 obviously must be even. Our big number ends in 1 and is therefore odd.

5. A number is divisible by 8 if and only if its last three digits form a number divisible by 8. Because 321 is not a multiple of 8, neither is our large number.

4. The fastest hand test of whether a large number is divisible by 11 is to add all the digits in even positions, do the same for those in odd positions, and find the difference between the two sums. The original number is a multiple of 11 if and only if the difference is 0 or a multiple of 11.

Consider the first 18 digits in our enormous number: 987654321987654321. The digits in odd positions add to 45 and those in even positions also add to 45. The difference in the sums is 0, therefore 987654321987654321 is a multiple of 11. The number of cards in the

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gargantuan deck consists of this sequence repeated half a million times, therefore, it too is a multiple of 11.

3. All powers of even numbers must end with an even digit, and all powers of 5 must end in 5. Only powers of numbers ending in 1,3,7, or 9 can end in 1.

2. It can be proved (not easily) that every perfect number has a digital root of 1. Of course only an extremely small proportion of digital-root-1 numbers are perfect. As we learned earlier, 987654321 has a digital root of 9.

When a perfect number is written in binary notation it has a simple, striking pattern that makes it instantly recognizable. It consists of n ones followed by $n - 1$ zeros, and is perfect if and only if the number represented by the sequence of ones is prime. For example, consider the first four perfect numbers: 6, 28, 496, and 8128. In binary notation they are 110, 11100, 111110000, and 1111111000000. The primes represented by the ones are 3, 7, 31, and 127.

Unfortunately, this pattern is no help in searching for large perfect numbers because it is difficult to know when a long sequence of ones, in binary, represents a prime. In the examples given, the number of ones in the sequences happen to be the first four primes: 2,3,5,7. The next prime is 11. Alas, a sequence of eleven ones is a binary expression for 4095, which obviously is not prime because it ends in 5. Consequently, the binary number 11111111110000000000 is not prime. From here on it gets harder and harder to tell if a binary number of this form is prime.

Try this on your calculator. Divide 987654321 by 123456789 and see what you get. The answer is astonishing. For a similar surprise, divide 987654312 (note the reversal of 2 and 1) by 8. More surprises follow if you add 123456789 to 987654321, or if you take the smaller from the larger. In the latter case, it is not obvious at first that all nine digits are in the difference.

1. A plus total obviously becomes minus if every sign is changed to the opposite sign:

$$-9 - 87 + 65 - 4 + 32 + 1 = -2$$

Without a minus sign in front there are six ways to make a total of -2.

Now for a curious little combinatorial puzzle involving the twelve numbers on the face of a clock. Can you rearrange the numbers (keeping them in a circle) so no triplet of adjacent numbers has a sum higher than 21? This is the smallest value that the highest sum of a triplet can have.

I know of no procedure for finding such a permutation, but there must be a way to write a computer program that will print all such permutations in a reasonable time. I'll hold off until next month giving the only answer I know to this one.

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STRANGE ERUPTIONS

by Harry Turtledove

Harry Turtledove, both under his own name and as Eric G. Iverson, has published stories in *IAsfm*, *Analog*, *Amazing*, and *Universe 10*. Mr. Turtledove has also sold a fantasy tetralogy to Del Rey Books, which is due to start appearing in 1987. "Strange Eruptions" draws on his academic background in Byzantine history.

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Diseased Nature oftentimes breaks forth
In strange eruptions.

—*Shakespeare*
Henry IV, Part I, Act III

Basil Argyros felt trapped behind the mounds of papyrus on his desk.

Not for the first time, he wondered if becoming a magistrianos had been wise. When he had been an officer of scouts in the Roman army, the post seemed wonderful, dashing, exotic. Magistrianoi were crack imperial agents, investigators, sometimes spies. They answered to the Master of Offices, who reported directly to the Emperor.

Argyros had thought his new job would be similar to the old, only on an Empire-wide scale. He had not realized how little time agents spent in the field, and how much time sifting minutiae. The imperial bureaucracy was thirteen centuries old. There were a lot of minutiae to sift.

He sighed and went back to the report he was drafting, which dealt with the foiling of some Franco-Saxon merchants' efforts to smuggle purple-dyed cloth out of Constantinople. The petty princes and dukes of Germany and northern Gallia—the southern coast, of course, belonged to the Empire—would pay almost anything to deck themselves in the fabric reserved for the Roman Emperor.

But even though Argyros had detected the attempt to escape with contraband, he had had nothing to do with actually arresting the barbarians. All he had done was spot a discrepancy in a silk-dyer's accounts, which hardly gave him the action he craved.

He sighed again. At last the report was done. A good thing, too: advancing twilight was making it hard to see to write. He signed the report and dated it: "Done in the year of the world 6816, the sixth indiction, on July 16, the feast-day of St.—"

He paused in annoyance, stuck his head out the door of his office, and asked a passing clerk, "Whose feast-day is it today?"

"St. Mouamet's."

"Thanks." Argyros scowled at his own stupidity, his thick eyebrows drawing together to form a black bar across his forehead. He should never have forgotten that, not when Mouamet was one of his favorite saints on the calendar. Born a pagan Arab, Mouamet had accepted Christianity on a trading journey up into Syria, and dwelt for some years in a monastery outside Damascus. A great Persian invasion sent him fleeing to Constantinople. He learned Greek there, and became a splendid hymnographer. He died, full of years, as archbishop of New Carthage in distant Ispania.

Argyros' sour mood evaporated as he walked down the stairs of the

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Praitorion, the imperial office building in which he worked. After all, here he was on the Mese, the main street of Constantinople, the most splendid city in the world. Had he not joined the magistrianoi, likely he never would have set foot in the imperial capital.

A procession of black-robed priests came down the Mese from the west, heading toward the great cathedral of Hagia Sophia. Some priests carried upraised candles, others wooden crosses, while one bore the image of a saint. Argyros piously crossed himself as he heard the hymn they were chanting: "There is no God but the Lord, and Christ is His son."

He smiled. If all else failed, that hymn would have reminded him whose day it was. Though Mouamet was almost seven centuries dead, his religious verse still had the power to move any good Christian: but for Paul, no convert had embraced his new faith with greater zeal.

The magistrianos stood watching until the procession had passed, then went up the Mese in the direction from which it had come. His own home was in the central part of the city, between the church of the Holy Apostles and the aqueduct of Valens.

He quickened his steps. His wife Helen would be waiting for him, and so would their baby son Sergios. His long, usually somber face softened as he thought of the boy. Sergios was getting old enough to know who he was when he came home at night, and to greet him with a large, toothless smile. Argyros shook his head in amazement at how swiftly time passed. A couple of months ago, the baby had been only a wailing lump. Now he was starting to be a person.

Helen and Sergios alone should have sufficed to reconcile Argyros to being a magistrianos. Had he not come to Constantinople, he never would have met her, and their son would not have been born. That was disturbing even to think about.

He turned north off the Mese, picking his way through the maze of smaller lanes. Thanks to sound planning and strict laws, even those were cobbled and a dozen feet wide, nothing like the cramped, muddy back alleys of Serrhes, the Balkan town where Argyros had grown up. Even balconies could not come closer than ten feet to the opposite wall, and had to be at least fifteen feet above the ground, to let light and air through.

As darkness descended, shops and taverns began closing, spilling out their patrons. The whole world came to do business in Constantinople. On the streets were Persians in felt skullcaps, the ancient rivals of the Roman Empire; beaky Arabs, men of Mouamet's blood, wearing flowing robes; flat-faced, long-unwashed nomads from the northern steppe; blond, blustering, trousered Germans. Men from every part of the Roman Empire mingled with the foreigners: stocky, heavily bearded Armenians; swarthy Egyptians, some with shaven heads; broad-faced Sklavenoi from

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the lands near the Danube; Carthaginians; Italians; even a few Ispanians staring about in amazement at the wonders of the city. All over the Empire, Constantinople was *the* city, and had been for a thousand years.

Then there were the Constantinopolitans themselves. To Argyros, who had only lived in the capital for a couple of years, the locals seemed much like the black-capped little sparrows with whom they shared it. They were bustling, cheeky, always on the lookout for the main chance, everlastingly curious, and quick to lose interest in anything no longer new. Of a steadier, more sober nature himself, he found them endlessly fascinating and altogether unreliable.

He also found them exasperating, for they were self-centered to the point of being blind to others. That was literally true: he watched scores of people walk past the man in the gutter as if he did not exist. He might have understood had the fellow been a derelict, but he was not. He was clean and well-groomed, his brocaded robe of good quality. He did not look as though he had been overcome by drink.

Muttering under his breath, the magistrianos bent to see what he could do for the man. Perhaps he was an epileptic, and would soon come back to his senses. Many people still had a superstitious fear of epilepsy, though Hippokrates had shown more than four centuries before the Incarnation that it was a disease like any other.

Argyros reached down to feel the fellow's forehead. He jerked his hand away as if he had touched a flame. And so, almost, he had; the man burned with fever. Peering closer, the magistrianos saw a red rash on his face and hands.

"Mother of God, help me!" he whispered. He rubbed his right hand over and over again on his robe, and would have paid many gold nomismata not to have touched the man's skin.

"You!" he called to a passerby whose clothes and, even more, whose manner proclaimed him to be a native. "Are you from this part of the city?"

The man set his hands on his hips. "What if I am? What's it to you?"

"Quick as you can, fetch the medical officer." Every district had one, to see to the drainage system and watch out for contagious disease. "I think this man has smallpox."

"Maybe you were wrong," Helen Argyra said later that night. "Or even if you were right, maybe there will be only the one case."

"I pray you're right," Argyros said. As he had many times before, he wondered how his wife managed to look on the bright side of things. He sometimes thought it was because she had eight fewer years than his own thirty. But he had been no great optimist in his early twenties. He

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had to admit to himself that her nature simply was more sunny than his.

They contrasted physically as well as emotionally. Argyros was tall and lean, with the angular features and dark, mournful eyes of an icon. The top of Helen's head barely reached his shoulder. While her hair was dark, her fair complexion, high, wide cheekbones, and blue eyes spoke of Sklavenic ancestors.

Sergios, Argyros thought, was a lucky little boy: he looked like his mother.

Helen went on, "I don't understand how it could be smallpox, Basil. There hasn't been an outbreak in the city since my father was a boy."

"Which will not keep God from sending another one if He decides our sins warrant it."

She crossed herself. *"Kyrie eleison,"* she exclaimed: "Lord, have mercy!"

"Lord have mercy, indeed," he agreed. In crowded Constantinople, smallpox could spread like wildfire. Except for the plague, it was the most frightful illness the Empire knew. And whole centuries went by without the plague, but every generation, it seemed, saw a smallpox epidemic, sometimes mild, sometimes savage.

Helen had a knack for pulling Argyros away from such gloomy reflections. "Neither of us can change God's will," she said with brisk practicality, "so we may as well have supper."

Supper was bread with olive oil for dipping, a stew of tuna and leeks, and white raisins for dessert. "Delicious," Argyros said, and meant it, though he was still not used to eating fish so often. In his upcountry home town, the meat in the stew would have been goat or lamb. But fish was much cheaper here by the sea and, though he made more as a junior magistrianos than he had in the army, he had not had to rent a house or support a family in those days . . . and Helen was talking about hiring a maidservant.

Fish, then.

After she cleared away the dishes, Helen nursed Sergios in a beechwood rocking chair she had bought after he was born. While she was nursing, she would only talk about small, pleasant things. That was one of the few rules she imposed on her husband; she firmly maintained that breaking it made her give less milk. The way Sergios had squalled hungrily the couple of times he tried to nurse after Argyros, full of his own affairs, ignored the rule had made Argyros keep to it thereafter.

Sometimes the restriction irritated him. Now he was just as glad of it. He told Helen about one of his fellow magistrianoi whose wife had had twins a couple of weeks after Sergios was born, and who did not look as though he slept at all any more. Helen gave him the neighborhood

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gossip, either gleaned from the view from the balcony or traded with other women among the market stalls.

Sergios fell asleep while she rocked him. She carried him to his crib. He would probably stay asleep until somewhere close to sunrise. Argyros sighed in relief as he thought of that. It had only been a few weeks since the baby woke two or three times every night, crying for his mother's breast.

She might have been reading his thoughts. Her eyes answered his. "Shall we go to bed?" she asked, adding mischievously, "But not, I think, to sleep."

"No, not to sleep," Argyros said. His fingers undid the clasps of her blouse, which she had fastened again after feeding Sergios. The urgency with which he took her made her gasp in surprise (for he was usually more restrained), but not in displeasure.

Spent afterwards, she slept almost at once, her legs and rump pressed warmly against him. He lay awake himself. His thoughts lit now here, now there, until he realized why he had been so importunate: that helped hold worry away for a while.

He grimaced in the darkness. That was not fair to Helen, or flattering to his own motivations.

It did not help him rest, either.

The magistrianos went to and from the Praitorion fearfully for the next few days, dreading what he might see on the way. He distrusted the way everything remained utterly ordinary, and feared it to be a cruel deception—though it was cruel only to him, for he had seen the stricken man, while the city remained unaware of its danger. But after a while he began to believe Helen had been right, or that the fervent prayers the two of them had sent up were being answered.

He held to that belief as long as he could, even after fewer magistrianoi and other functionaries began coming to work each day. Life was chancy at the best of times, and any illness dangerous: doctors could do so little against sickness. Prayer offered more hope than nostrums.

But when one missing man after another was reported down with a fever, Argyros' alarm returned. And the day he found out the first of them had broken out in pustules, he decided the Praitorion could do without him for a while. He was not that afraid anyone would accuse him of shirking. Already half the people rich enough to own second homes outside the city were moving out to them "for the sake of fresh air." The rumble of leaving carts full of household goods went on day and night.

Most Constantinopolitans, of course, could not afford to flee. Nevertheless, the streets grew empty. People who did stir abroad looked at

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each other warily. Smallpox might have been God's curse, but everyone knew only too well it could be caught from a sick man.

The price of grain fluctuated wildly. One day almost all the mills in the city would be open, and almost all of them empty. Then, for no reason any man could find, only a handful would operate, with people lined up around the block to buy.

Argyros felt he was taking his life in his hands whenever he went out to buy food. Helen wanted to share the burden with him, but he said no so sternly he got his way. "How would I feed Sergios if something happened to you?" he demanded. "I'm not built for the role, you know."

"How would I feed him, if you get sick and can't feed me?" she replied, but she did not press the point. The thought of danger to her baby was enough to make her listen to him.

He did not tell her he would have acted the same way if the smallpox had come the year before, when they were still childless. Any risk he could spare her, he would.

Only churches stayed crowded while the smallpox was loose in the city. Priests and layfolk alike petitioned the Lord to return His favor to the people and end the epidemic. People also rushed to the divine liturgy for more personal reasons, to pray for the health of their loved ones—and for their own.

When Helen wanted to pray at the great church of Hagia Sophia, Argyros could not refuse her, nor did he make any great effort to. A trip to church, he reasoned, was different from a shopping expedition. God might be angry at Constantinople, but surely he would not smite them in His own house.

Carrying Sergios in her arms, Helen went out into the city for the first time in several weeks. She exclaimed at how still the streets were: "It's as if this were some country town, not the city!" Her voice echoed off houses.

"It's quieter here," Argyros said, remembering Serrhes. "True, the towns have only a handful of people next to Constantinople, but they're also much smaller, so they can seem crowded."

They walked east along the Mese toward the great church, whose dome dominated the city skyline. The stalls of the horse-market in the forum known as the Amastrianum were empty; no one had any beasts out to sell. A quarter-mile further down the street, a few lonely sheep bleated in their pens in the forum of Theodosios. The farmers who had brought them to market stood around scratching their heads, wondering where their customers had gone.

"Poor souls," Helen said with her ready compassion. "They must not have heard aught's amiss."

"I'm surprised the gate-guards didn't warn them," Argyros said, but

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on second thought he was not surprised at all. The guards at a minor gate, say the gate of Selymbria or that of Rhegion, might well have decamped, leaving the portal standing wide for rustics to saunter straight into the city.

The magistrianos shouted across the square to the farmers. At the dread word "smallpox," they crossed themselves in alarm and began rounding up their animals. "I wish we were coming home from church instead of on our way there," Argyros said. "A sheep could feed us for days."

"We would have got a good price, too," Helen sighed. "Ah, well. I hope their owners get home safe."

Only in the Augusteion, the square on which Hagia Sophia fronted, were there signs that Constantinople was not a ghost town. Even there, the booksellers' cubicles and perfumers' stalls were all closed. But some food shops were operating, to serve the people who came to the great church to pray. Argyros smelled breaded squid frying in olive oil and garlic. His stomach rumbled hungrily. He had to force himself to walk past the smoking charcoal braziers.

People filled the great church's colonnaded atrium. Argyros waved to a clerk he had not seen for several days. Other such meetings were going on all over the atrium. Many folk felt as he did, that going to church was the one safe outing they could make.

Keeping a protective arm around Helen, he led her into the exonarthex, the hallway between the atrium and the church proper. He bent to kiss her and Sergios, saying, "I'll meet you right here after the services."

"All right," she said, and turned away to head for the stairs up to the women's gallery: as in any other church, men and women worshiped separately.

Someone close by let out a loud sneeze.

"Your health," Argyros said politely.

Entering the nave of Hagia Sophia was an experience overwhelming enough to make the magistrianos forget for a while that smallpox was running free in the city. No man could enter the great church and remain unmoved. When Justinian rebuilt it after the Nika riots, he had chosen the two best architects he could find and let them draw on the resources of the whole Empire. The result deserved his boast when the magnificent structure was complete: "O Solomon, I have vanquished you!"

Polished marbles of green, red, yellow, polychrome, drawn from the Bosporos, Greece, Egypt, Isauria; gleaming lamps—gold, silver, brass; a forest of columns with intricately carven acanthus capitals; four semi-domes, each full of mosaicwork ornament: all led the eye up to the central dome that was the grandest triumph of Justinian's brilliant builders.

Supported on pendentives, it reached 180 feet above the floor. Forty-

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two windows pierced its base; the rays of sunlight shining through them left the dome eerily insubstantial, as if it were floating in space above the church rather than a part of it. The ever-shifting light glittered off the gold mosaic tesserae in the dome, and off the Cross of Christ at the apex.

Had that dome not existed, the great church's sanctuary would have sufficed to seize the eye. The iconostasis in front of the altar was of gold-plated silver, with images upon it of Christ, the Virgin, and the Apostles. The holy table itself was pure gold, encrusted with precious stones. So were the candelabra, the thuribles, and the eucharistic vessels: ewers, chalices, patens, spoons, basins. Red curtains with cloth-of-gold figures of Christ and SS. Peter and Paul flanked the altar.

As always, the divine liturgy took Argyros out of himself, made him feel no longer a man alone in the world but part of the great Christian community, past, present, and future. The liturgy was ancient, ascribed to St. John Chrysostom, the theologian and scholar who had been patriarch of Constantinople less than a century after Constantine refounded the city.

The service was celebrated with splendor appropriate to its surroundings. The slow dignity of the prayers, the rich silks of the priests' dalmatics and chasubles, the sweet incense emanating from the thuribles, the choruses of perfectly trained men and boys that sang the hymns, all added together to convey to both spirit and senses the glory of God.

Prayers for the dead appeared twice in the service, after the reading of the Gospel and in the prayer for the church before communion. That was customary; it stressed the bond between the living and the dead and the close relationship between this world and the next. In this time of pestilence, though, the prayers were specially poignant.

Argyros shook his head in sorrow when at last the priest sang St. Symeon's song of leavetaking, removed his vestments, and brought the service to an end. Hagia Sophia seemed to bring the world to come so close to this one. Returning to simple mundanity was never easy afterwards.

Helen, as she usually did, looked at things from a different perspective. "Thank you for taking me, Basil," she said as they were walking home. "I needed to be reminded how God still watches over us."

She was without the dogged curiosity Argyros brought to his faith, but he often thought her belief the purer. She accepted where he, by nature and training, always looked to question. The longer the smallpox epidemic went on, the more he saw good people dying along with the bad, the more he began to wonder why God was not watching more closely.

His mind still shied from the notion. Undoubtedly God had His reasons. When He wanted Basil to learn them, Basil would.

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"That was delicious, dear," Argyros said, putting aside his plate of garlicky lamb stew with real regret.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Helen said. "Would you like some more?" She offered him her own plate.

"You've hardly touched it," he said in surprise. "You'll have to do better than that. I remember my mother and my older sister back in Serrhes saying they were hungry all the time while they were nursing."

"I have been too, till now," Helen said, a little defensively. "I just haven't felt much like eating the last couple of days."

"Do you think you're pregnant again?" Argyros asked, remembering how nauseated she had been when she was first carrying Sergios.

But she shook her head. "This is different, more like I'm tired all the time." She laughed. "I don't know why I should be. You've helped a lot around the house, and I've hardly been out since we prayed at the great church a couple of weeks ago."

She stood to pick up the dishes and take them back to the kitchen, where she would set them to soak. She paused to undo the top two clasps of her tunic. "I think the heat lately has helped take away my appetite," she said, fanning herself with her hand.

Argyros' thick eyebrows shot up. Summer in Constantinople was hot and sticky, but the latest bad heat wave had broken three days before. He rose from the table, went around, and kissed her on the forehead.

She smiled. "What was that for?"

"For you, of course," he answered easily, returning her smile. He would not show her the twinge of fear he felt, but it was there. Under his lips, her skin had been warm and dry.

She slept restlessly during the night, and was a long time falling back to sleep after she got up to feed Sergios. So was Argyros, but for a different reason.

Helen woke in the morning with a headache. "Would you go out and pick me some willow twigs?" she asked; the bitter sap in them was soothing.

Argyros did as she requested. Along with its splendid buildings, Constantinople boasted several large parks, one not far from the church of the Holy Apostles. Many Constantinopolitans, city dwellers for generations, would not have known a willow tree from a rosebush. The magistrianos, from his small Balkan town and also a veteran of life in the field, had no trouble finding what he sought. He used his dagger to slice off a handful of the youngest, tenderest shoots, then hurried back to his home.

He gasped in dismay: though the day was warmer than the previous couple had been, Helen huddled under every blanket in the house. He

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could hear her teeth chattering across the room. "So cold, Basil, so cold," she whispered, but when he put his hand to her head he found her burning hot.

"Mother of God, help me, help us," he exclaimed. He knelt beside her, sponged her brow, made her chew on the twigs. Their juice also fought fever, though how much it could do against such raging heat he did not know.

When he had made her as comfortable as he could, he rushed out again, to the home of the district medical officer. That worthy was a small, delicate-featured man named Arethas Saronites. He looked tired unto death. When the magistrianos stammered out that his wife was sick, Saronites only brushed back a lock of his light brown hair from his eyes and said, "You're Argyros, from the street of the pillowmakers, aren't you?"

At Basil's nod, the medical officer said, "God grant her healing," and made an addition to the long list on his desk. He looked up, surprised to find the magistrianos still there. "Will there be anything more?"

"A doctor, damn you!"

"One will be sent you."

"Now," Argyros said in a voice like iron. Of its own volition, his hand slipped toward his knife.

Neither tone nor motion affected Saronites. "My dear sir, one in ten in the city is ill, maybe one in five. We do not have the physicians to treat them all at once."

Deaf to his words, Argyros' eyes flicked to the hallway.

"You had better desist, or Thomas there will put an arrow through your brisket."

The archer had his bow drawn and aimed. "You are not the first," Saronites said kindly. "How can I blame you for trying to help your loved one? You will get your physician in your proper turn, I promise you."

Shamed and beaten, Argyros gave a brusque nod and left. When he got home, Helen was sitting in the parlor, nursing Sergios. "Have a care, darling, or he may catch your sickness," the magistrianos said. He refused to say "smallpox"—if he did not name it, he could still hope it was not there.

Except for two spots of hectic color high on her cheeks, Helen was very pale. Her eyes glittered feverishly. But she was not shivering any more, and she answered him steadily: "I know, Basil, but he can starve too, and my breasts have milk in them. Do you think I could get a wetnurse to come in this house while I'm ill?"

Argyros bit his lip. No woman would risk herself thus, and he knew it. Nor could he condemn them for that, just as Saronites had not grown

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angry when he tried to take more than his due for Helen. "Cow's milk?" he suggested at last.

Helen frowned. "It gives babies a flux of the bowels," she said. After a moment, though, she muttered, half to herself, "Well, that's a smaller chance to take." Her voice firmed. "Yes, go get some. But how will you feed it to him? They take so little, sucking at rags soaked in milk."

Argyros knew she was right about that. He plucked at his beard. His time as a scouts officer had got him used to improvising, to using things to fit his needs, no matter what they were intended for. And unlike the routineers who staffed most of the Roman bureaucracy, he had to stay mentally alert to do his job. So—

He snapped his fingers. "I have it! I'll use an enema syringe. By squeezing the sheep's bladder, I can make as much milk as Sergios wants flow through the reed into his mouth."

Sick as she was, Helen burst out laughing. "The very thing! What a clever husband I have. Oh—buy a new one."

"Yes, I suppose I should, shouldn't I?" Argyros smiled for the first time that day. As he went out again, he felt a small stir of hope.

Constantinople's dairies were small because there was not much room for grazing in the city. For the same reason, most of the dairies were at the edge of parks, so that cattle could crop the grass there. The magistrianos hurried to the park where he had cut off the willow shoots that morning.

He waited impatiently while the dairyman squeezed out a jug of milk. "You have a sick child?" the man asked.

"No—his mother."

"Christ grant she get well, then, for her sake and the lad's." The dairyman and Argyros crossed themselves. The former went on, "Terrible, the smallpox. Me, I spend most of my time praying it'll stay away from my family."

"So did I," the magistrianos said bleakly.

"Aye, and many besides you. I've more praying to do, though, for my wife Irene's given me three sons and five daughters." The dairyman bobbed his head. "I'm Peter Skleros, by the way."

Argyros gave his own name, then said, "Eight children! And all well?"

"Aye, even little Peter, my youngest. He's only three, and just starting to help get the dung out of the barn. Poor little fellow got a blister last week and had us all with our hearts in our throats, but it was only the cowpox."

"What's that? I never heard of it," Argyros said.

"You'd have to be a dairyman or a farmer to know it. Mostly the cows catch it—you'd guess that from the name, wouldn't you?" he chuckled, "—but sometimes them as keep 'em get it too. I had it myself, years ago.

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But that's not here nor there—we're all well, and if God wants to let us stay so, why, I'll keep on thanking Him and praising His name. And I'll add a prayer or two for your family while I'm about it."

"I thank you. May God hear yours more than He has mine."

"You pray for yourself, sir, too," Skleros said. "I can see by looking that you've not had the smallpox. It'd go hard if it came on you along with the rest."

"Yes, it would." The magistrianos shook his head; he had not thought about that. He made himself put the worry aside. Short of fleeing his wife and child, he could not lessen the chance he would take the disease. He clapped the lid on the jar of milk, tucked it under his arm, and headed home.

"I hope I see you again," the dairyman called after him.

"So do I," Argyros said.

But when he got home, he forgot about Sergios and what his son needed, though the baby lay howling in his cradle. Helen must have set him down before she tried to return to her own bed, but she did not make it there. Argyros found her sprawled senseless on the floor. When he touched her, he swore and prayed at the same time: her fever was back, worse than before.

She was a dead weight in his arms as he picked her up; absently, he wondered why unconscious people seemed so much heavier to carry.

She half-roused when he set her on the bed. "Go away," she muttered. "Go away."

"Hush." He did leave her for a moment, to soak a rag in a ewer of water. On the way back, he blew on it to make it cool, then set it on her forehead. She sighed and seemed to lose touch with the world again. He sat beside her, took her limp hand in his.

So passed the day. Argyros stayed by his wife, sponging her face and limbs with moist cloths and holding her still when the fever made her thrash about. She came partly to herself several times, and kept urging him to get out. She would not listen to him when he told her no, but repeated her demand over and over.

Finally she revived enough to ask him, "Why won't you go?"

"Because I love you," he said. A smile lingered on her lips when she lapsed back into stupor. He had said that dozens of times while she was unconscious; it warmed him that she'd finally understood.

He only left the bedroom when Sergios cried. He was clumsy cleaning the baby—Helen had done most of that—but he managed. Before he gave Sergios the milk-filled syringe, he smeared the tip of the tube with honey. The old midwife's trick made the baby suck lustily, though he did make a face at the unfamiliar taste of his food.

Near dusk, he cooked some thin barley gruel to feed Helen. As an

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afterthought, he stirred some honey into that, too: Helen was hardly thinking more clearly than Sergios. She ate about half of what he'd made, less than he thought she needed, but better, he supposed, than nothing.

The thin waning crescent moon was rising in the east when exhaustion clubbed Argyros into sleep. A few minutes later, Sergios' howling woke him. He stumbled out to take care of his son, and heard the first cockcrow just as the baby was nodding off.

His eyes were full of grit; he could feel himself walking in slow motion, as if the air had turned thick. Perhaps because he was so tired, the idea of going to Helen's family for someone to help struck him with the force he imagined Christianity had hit St. Mouamet. He took along the empty jar that had held milk. While one of Helen's younger brothers or sisters came to watch over her and the baby, he would go back to Skleros' dairy and refill it: or he would send them to get the milk, if they feared entering a disease-filled home.

Helen's father was a notary named Alexios Moskhos. As always, several dogs started barking when Argyros knocked on his door; on holidays, Moskhos liked to go into the countryside and hunt rabbits. The magistrianos waited for his father-in-law to come cursing and laughing through the pack to let him in.

He heard Moskhos approach, but the door did not open. Instead, Moskhos cautiously called through it, "Who's there? What do you want?"

"It's Basil. I need help—Helen's sick." He explained what he needed.

There was a long silence. Then Argyros listened in disbelief as his father-in-law said, "You'd better go, Basil. I'll pray for you, but no more than that. No one here's been ill, and no one's going to be if I have anything to do with it. I'll not hazard all of mine against one already poxed."

"Let me hear your wife say that," the magistrianos exclaimed.

"It's for her I do this."

"Why, you gutless, worthless—" Indignation choked Argyros. He hammered on the door with his fist. "Let me in!"

"I'll count three," Moskhos said coldly. "Then I set the hounds on you. One—two—"

The magistrianos left, cursing; he could tell his father-in-law would do what he'd said. What made it somehow worse was that Argyros understood. He wondered what he would have done had Helen been well and Moskhos come to him for aid.

He was honest enough to admit he did not know.

Peter Skleros' mouth turned down when Argyros came to buy more milk. "I was hoping your lady might just have, oh, eaten something spoiled that made her ill," he said as he led the magistrianos into his barn. "But that's not so, is it?"

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"I'm afraid not. I wish it were."

"And I," the dairyman said. As he had said, his little son, also named Peter, was helping to clean the barn. He took the boy by the arm and brought him up to the magistrianos. "I wish it could have been like this." There were three pockmarks, close together, on little Peter's wrist. They looked like smallpox marks, but no smallpox victim escaped with so few.

"This is your cowpox, eh?"

"Yes." He patted the boy on the bottom. "Run along, son; the gentleman is done with you now." To Argyros: "Here, I'll get your milk." He pulled a stool up beside a cow.

"Your family is still well?"

"Yes, praise the Lord, the Virgin, and all the saints. Good of you to think to ask, sir, with your own troubles on your mind." He handed the magistrianos the jar of milk, waved away payment. "Really, it's not enough to bother over. You take it, and keep your boy strong till your wife is better."

Against the dairyman's insistence, Argyros could only accept as gracefully as possible. He compared Skleros' behavior to that of Helen's father, and could only shake his head. Like combat, the epidemic brought out the best and the worst in people.

When he got home, it was as if he had not left. Helen's fever still raged. Sometimes she knew him, but more often she was lost in a world of mostly unpleasant dreams. He tried to keep her cool, but the burning heat of her forehead dried his compresses almost as fast as he put them on.

Sergios drank the cow's milk. His father hoped he was taking enough. As with Helen, he supposed anything was better than nothing.

The next morning, Helen felt a little better. She was lucid more, and did not seem as hot. By contrast, Sergios was fussy. As Helen had predicted, his insides resented the new food he was getting. He spent a lot of time crying, his legs drawn up to his belly against gas pains. Argyros thought he felt warm, but would not have sworn to it.

A knock on the door that afternoon made the magistrianos jump. He got up from beside Helen, hurried to the entrancehall. "There's sickness here," he called, expecting whoever it was to beat a hasty retreat.

Instead, to his amazement, rumbling laughter answered him. "I'd not be here if there weren't," said the man outside; his Greek had a strong Italic Latin flavor. "I'm a doctor, or so they tell me."

In his relief, Argyros had to try three times before he could work the latch and throw the door wide. The man who brushed past him was a vigorous sixty, stocky, and broad-shouldered. His big nose had been well broken sometime in the distant past; he wore his graying beard high on

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his cheeks to cover as many old pockmarks as he could, but it did not hide them all.

He barked laughter when he saw Argyros looking at him. "Oh, I was pretty enough once," he said, "but when you get as old as I am, it doesn't matter worth a damn any more anyway. Now tell me who's got it and where they are." He set hands on hips and waited.

"This way, ah—" The magistrianos paused, flustered both by the doctor's blunt manner and because he did not know the man's name.

"I'm Gian Riario, if you're wondering," the doctor said: "Ioannes Rhiarios, if you'd rather have the Greek like most people here." As the original language of Rome, Latin was still co-official with Greek, but had less prestige than the tongue of the richer, more anciently civilized eastern half of the Empire.

"I speak Latin," Argyros said mildly. "If you'd rather use it—"

Riario shook his head and gestured impatiently.

"Before you go farther, I have to tell you that I fear it's the smallpox," Argyros continued.

"You waiting to see if I run?" Riario said, and laughed again. He ran his fingers over his pocked forehead. "I've had it already, and I'll not catch it again. You can only get it once, no matter what the old wives say. Either it kills you or it leaves you alone afterwards."

"Is that really true?"

"It's true, or else I'd've been dead five hundred times this past month. Come on, who's sick here? Wife? Brats? Not your mistress, or you'd be keeping her somewhere else."

"My wife," the magistrianos said, refusing to be drawn; he recognized that Riario's abrasiveness had no malice behind it. "My baby son is well so far, thank God."

"Aye, it's very bad in babes. Well, take me to your woman, then"—Riario yawned till his jaw creaked—"for I've more stops after this one." For the first time, Argyros noticed the dark pouches under the physician's eyes. The man was close to working himself to death.

The magistrianos led Riario back to the bedroom, saying as they went in, "I think Helen is better today than she has been for the last couple of days." Indeed, his wife had her wits about her, and managed a smile for Argyros and for the doctor when he was introduced.

Riario at the bedside was nothing like Riario with someone who did not need him. He felt Helen's forehead, murmured, "Oh, very good," and reached for the wrist to take her pulse. "Very good," he repeated, his eyes on her face.

She smiled again, then made an apologetic gesture and scratched at her cheek. The doctor did not seem to notice. "You'll be up and about

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before long," he said. "Now I'm just going to check to see that your baby's doing well too. Does he look like you, or is he homely like his father?"

She giggled.

Riario snorted. "You come with me, sirrah, and leave your lady at peace," he said to Argyros. When they were in the hall, out of earshot of the bedroom, he let out the sigh he had been holding back.

The magistrianos seized his arm. "She's better, not so?" he demanded, remembering barely in time to keep his voice down.

"It often seems that way," Riario said, "just before the pocks come. You saw that rash she was picking at on her face? That's how it begins."

Argyros heard him as though from very far away. Young, bright Helen's cheery face pitted and slagged with scars like this old doctor's? It was not that he could not love her afterwards. He knew he could; he cherished her for much more than the outward seeming of her body. But he feared she could not love herself disfigured, and her sorrow would take the summer from his year.

Riario might have read his mind. "Don't fret over her looks," he said bluntly. "Fret over whether she lives. The pocks are the crisis of the disease. If they begin to scab over and heal, she's won. Otherwise—"

"Is there nothing you can do?" The magistrianos knew he was pleading, and did not care.

"If there were, don't you think I'd've done it for myself?" Riario's laugh was harsh. "I hate smallpox, and even more I hate being helpless against it. If it's God's curse as they say, why, I curse God back for it."

Argyros crossed himself at the blasphemy, but the physician answered with a two-fingered obscene gesture Italians often used. Riario said, "If you'd watched as many men—aye, and women like your wife, and babes like your babe—as I have die in pain, and all you could do was close their eyes when they'd gone, you'd understand. When God smote Egypt, Pharaoh got off lucky, for He didn't send him smallpox."

He shook his head and seemed to come back to himself. "Show me your son, as long as I'm here." The bitter edge returned for a moment: "Not that I'll be able to do any good if he does have it."

But Riario's interest revived when he saw the jar of milk and the syringe by Sergios' cradle. "What have we here?" he asked. Argyros explained. The doctor rubbed his chin, nodded. "Clever. A trick I'll have to remember."

He picked up the baby, felt Sergios' forehead with his hand and then, as if not sure what it told him, with his lips. "A touch of something there, maybe," he said at last, "but who knows what? These little ones take all sorts of fevers. If it's bad, you'll find out soon enough."

Again, he was gentle with his patient, cuddling Sergios and making him smile before he put him down. To Argyros he said, "I'm sorry I can't

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offer more hope. No doubt you'd rather have a doctor who tells you sweet-sounding lies."

"No, I prefer an honest man," the magistrianos said, which startled Riario but also seemed to satisfy him.

The physician gave a jerky nod and headed for the street. "Another mission of mercy," he said, rolling his eyes to show how much mercy he expected to bring. "Good fortune to you, Argyros; I'll call again in a few days, or when I have the chance." He nodded again and was gone.

Over the next week, Argyros learned why Riario hated smallpox so much. He watched helplessly as the disease's characteristic rash spread over Helen's face, arms, legs, and even onto her belly and back.

At first the marks were red and raised. They must have itched ferociously, for Helen scratched them till they bled. Her fever was back full force, and left her wits wandering. Argyros finally had to use rags to tie her hands to the bedposts to keep her from clawing herself in her delirium.

In the moments when her wits partly cleared, she wept all the time, moaning, "I'll be ugly, Basil, ugly. How will you be able to want me any more?" Nothing he said could get through to her to convince her she was wrong. That wounded him almost as much as being there hour by hour, day by day, watching the ravages of the disease grow ever worse. Sometimes he wondered if he was going mad. Sometimes he wished he could.

Most agonizing for him was how little he could do even to make her comfortable. He sponged off her sores several times a day. The coolness might have helped her fever a little, but none of the ointments of grease and honey and other less easily named ingredients that he brought did the least thing to help her itching.

Argyros could not make her eat much, and the days of fever wasted her. She grew very thin.

The only times he left the house were his daily trips to buy milk for Sergios. The baby was growing as used to his makeshift feedings with the syringe as he had been to his mother's breast. That saddened Argyros too, although he was relieved his son's fever had grown no worse.

He got to know Peter Skleros and his large family well: they were the only healthy people he was seeing. Once or twice he caught himself resenting them for escaping the smallpox, and immediately felt ashamed of his meanness.

He could not help being glad to get out of the house, though, and it was only natural that sometimes he invented small delays to keep from going straight back with his milk. He would help Skleros' children keep the dairy buildings clean, lead the cows to and from their grazing at the park. Once he even did his own milking.

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"Here, Sergios," he said with foolish pride when he gave the boy some of that jar. "Your father drew this with his own hands. Doesn't it taste especially good?"

Sergios was not impressed.

Helen got worse. The red patches on her skin turned to blisters, filled at first with a clear liquid and then with pus. When they broke, as they sometimes did in her thrashing, the smell was foul. She would not eat at all after that, and drank only a little water. She had no more control over her bodily functions than Sergios had.

Her breathing grew harsh and labored. Along with the pox, her skin began to look bruised. Though she was still delirious, she moved less and less. All these signs terrified Argyros, who ran for the church of the Holy Apostles for a priest to give her the last rites.

Though that church was second only to Hagia Sophia, it had but few ecclesiastics to serve it. Some were dead, others fled. Only one would go back to his house with him when he told them Helen had smallpox.

He cursed the rest for cowards. The priest, whose name was Ioasaph, set a hand on his arm. "They are no more than men, my son. Do not ask for what is beyond their strength."

"How do you dare come, then?"

Ioasaph shrugged; his thick brown beard bounced on his chest. "God will do with me as He wills. Whether I stay or come, I am in His hands."

The magistrianos wondered what Riario would say to that.

Then all such small thoughts crumbled to ashes within him, for when he and the priest returned to his home they found Helen dead. Ioasaph prayed over the body, then turned to Argyros. "She is at peace at last, and out of pain."

"Yes," Argyros said dully. He was surprised he did not feel more. It was like a swordcut: the damage was done, but the pain would come later.

Ioasaph said, "You must understand, this is God's will. She has gained eternal life, against which this world and its suffering are but a moment."

"Yes," Argyros said again, but he could not share the priest's calm confidence. Having been with Helen all the while, he found he could not see why heaven had to be purchased with a week of hell.

After a while, Ioasaph left. Argyros hardly noticed. He sat staring at Helen's body. Even in death she had no repose, but lay contorted.

He did not know how long he stayed by the bed they had shared. Sergios' cries finally roused him. He changed and fed the baby. He had joked with Helen about that, back in another lifetime.

Remembering their laughter reached him as the brute fact of death could not. He set down his son and buried his face in his hands. The tears came then, and for a long time would not go.

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At last, moving stiffly as one of Hephaistos' bronze men in the *Iliad*, he made himself go do what he had to. Arethas Saronites' sympathy sounded forced; the medical officer had said the same words too many times these past weeks. So too with his final advice: "Go home and wait for the burial party. It will come soon."

Two shaven-headed convicts bore Helen away to one of the large, newly dug graves outside the city. An overseer with a bow stood by. If the convicts lived through the epidemic, they would go free.

Had it not been for Sergios, the magistrianos would have given way to despair. The baby was far too little to understand that his mother was dead; he only knew he needed someone to take care of him. Sergios did not give Argyros much time to dwell on his own grief.

Argyros thought once more about getting the boy a wetnurse. Before, he had balked because he did not think one would come into a house of sickness. Now he did not want to expose Sergios to more outsiders than he had to. The baby was all he had left to remember his wife by. He did not count her family. After he sent the message telling them she was dead, he intended never to have anything to do with them again.

When the knock on the door came, he thought it was his father-in-law, come to try to make amends. His hand was on his knifehilt as he went to the front of the house. But instead of Alexios Moskhos, Gian Riario stood waiting.

The doctor's shoulders sagged when he read Argyros' face. For the first time, he looked old. "Oh, damnation," he said. "She was young and strong, and if she pulled through the crisis I thought I'd be able to help her. These are the hard ones to lose."

"What do you know about that?" the magistrianos lashed out at him.

"Do you think I was never married?" The question, and the raw hurt behind it, brought Argyros up short. After a moment, Riario went on, "Your baby is still well, I hope?"

"Yes."

"Something, anyway. I wasn't so lucky," the doctor murmured, more to himself than to Argyros. He grew brisk again: "Listen—if you so much as mislike the way he breaks wind, call me. I live on the street of the church of St. Symeon, six doors up from the church. Do you write? Yes? Good—you can leave a note on my door if I'm not there, and I probably won't be. Even if he farts funny, do you understand?"

"I do—and thank you."

Riario snorted, very much his cynical self again. "You'd thank me more if I really had a hope of doing something."

"You try."

"Well, maybe so. As I told you, the smallpox has done everything to

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me it can. I'm not afraid of it any more." He laughed harshly. "Futile, aye, but not afraid."

The magistrianos was afraid: he and Sergios were still vulnerable. After Riario left, he went back and fed the baby. Every syringe of milk his son gulped down felt like a triumph—what could show health better than a strong appetite?

Sergios was cranky the next day, but not enough to worry his father, in spite of Riario's words. Argyros went on with the melancholy tasks that sprang from Helen's death. He began to pack her belongings in sacks and boxes to take them to St. Symeon's church, where the deacons could distribute them to the needy.

Then the baby started crying again, and Argyros' head came up without his having to think about it. He knew the difference between fussy cries and those that meant something was really wrong. He hurried into Sergios' room, expecting that one of the fibulae he had used to fasten the baby's linen had come undone and was poking his son, or some similar minor catastrophe.

But nothing was obviously wrong. Sergios was not even wet. The crying stopped; Sergios seemed listless. Shrugging, Argyros bent to lift him out of the cradle and cuddle him. He almost dropped him—the baby's skin felt much too warm.

Icy fear shot up Argyros' back. As if to deny the reality of what his fingers told him, he filled the syringe bladder with milk and offered it to his son. Sergios gave a couple of halfhearted sucks, then spit up the little he had eaten. Argyros wrapped him in a blanket and dashed for Riario's house.

By good luck, the doctor was there. His eyes narrowed when he saw the baby. "Fever?" he asked sharply.

Argyros nodded, unable to make himself say yes out loud.

"It could be any of a myriad things," the doctor said. He cocked an eyebrow. "They do fall sick of other illnesses than smallpox, you know."

"Yes, and also from that. How will you know if it is?"

"The rash, of course, if it appears." Argyros was certain four days of waiting would drive him mad. That must have been plain on his face, for Riario went on, "It acts faster in infants than with adults. If no eruptions show up by tomorrow, or the next day at the latest, you've probably escaped."

He disappeared into the back of the house, returned with a small, stoppered vial. "Here's poppy-juice from Egypt. It will help the little fellow sleep, and that will do some good. I'll be by tomorrow morning to look at him again." He clapped the magistrianos on the back. "Even if it is smallpox, not everyone dies of it."

"No," Argyros agreed. He could not help remembering, though, what

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Riario had said before about smallpox and infants. He put that thought down by brute force as he carried Sergios home.

He gave his son a dose of the poppy-juice and waited until the baby had fallen into a heavy, drugged sleep. He sniffed at what was left of the jar of milk he had bought the day before. His nose wrinkled: it was sour. As soon as he was sure Sergios would not wake, he hurried to Skleros' dairy.

The dairyman's wife greeted him at the door and exclaimed over his grim visage. Maria Sklerina's plump features went pale when, flat-voiced, he told her Sergios was sick.

"Mother of God, not your little son too, after your wife!" she said, crossing herself. "I thank the Lord every day for sparing Peter and me and our eight, and he and I both added you to our prayers. Who can say why God does as He does?"

"Not I," Argyros replied. He scratched absently at the back of his hand, which itched.

Maria said, "Here, give me your jug and let me fill it for you. I know you don't want to spend a moment more than you have to away from him. They're dear, aren't they, even when they're so small you know loving them is such a gamble?" Her eyes grew sad. "We lost two babies ourselves, my husband and I, and mourned them almost as much as if they'd been grown. And we're luckier than most families we know."

"Indeed you are," Argyros said; his own parents had raised only three children out of seven births.

He was glad not to have to make any more conversation as he followed her out to the barn. She rinsed the jar and drew fresh milk from a cow that looked amazingly bored with the whole process. As her husband had before, she refused to take his money. He felt the sting of tears as he thanked her; any small kindness touched him deeply.

Still mostly asleep, Sergios ate a little, and did not throw it up. That gave Argyros enough hope to seek his own bed. His rest, though, was fitful, and Riario's knock not long after dawn came as a relief. He sprang up to let the doctor in.

But Riario had no good news to give him. He hissed in dismay when the magistrianos led him into Sergios' room. "The first eruptions already," he grunted, and Argyros saw he was right. Raised red patches were beginning to cover the baby's face, just as they had Helen. But with Helen, they had taken four days after the onset of the fever to appear. This was only the next day for Sergios.

"Is that bad?" Argyros asked, already afraid he knew the answer.

"Yes," the doctor said baldly: he was not one to mince words. "The faster the disease goes through its course, the worse the prognosis."

"What can I do to help him? There must be something!" the magis-

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trianos kept running the nails of one hand over the back of the other. He was not even aware he was doing it.

Riario sadly shook his head. "Only what you did for your wife. Keep the tot as comfortable as you can. Bathe him in cool water to try to fight the fever. Do your best to see he eats—he needs his strength. Come to me when you need more poppy-juice. Pray, if you think it does any good."

The physician's callous attitude toward prayer had shocked Argyros the first time he heard it. Now he only nodded. He still believed prayer could help the sick—but only sometimes.

Then Riario left, and he was alone with his son, alone to fight the inexorable progress of the smallpox. He had thought nothing could be worse than tending Helen had been. Now he saw he was wrong. It was as if some malign spell had accelerated the disease, so he could watch Sergios get worse hour by hour. Nothing he did slowed the illness in the slightest.

The only mercy—a small one—was the poppy-juice. It spared the baby the torment of itching Helen had gone through. Sergios hardly knew how, as the day waned and dusk fell, the pus-filled vesicles spread over his body. The end came not long after lamplighting time. The baby gave a small sigh and stopped breathing. For several minutes, his father did not realize he was dead.

When he did, he fled the house that had seen his young family begin and end as if it were accursed. To him, it was. For two coppers, he would have put a torch to it, no matter if the blaze set half Constantinople afire. He wandered blindly through the dark lanes and alleys of the city.

He was walking past the church of St. Symeon when he noticed where he was. Later, he realized it was probably not chance that had led his feet thither. He made for Riario's house. Of all the people he knew in the city, the doctor was most like to grasp his anguish and, in grasping, help temper it.

When a knock sounds in the middle of the night, men commonly come to the door with a lamp in one hand and a cudgel or knife in the other, ready to fend off footpads. Because of his trade, though, Riario was used to such rude summonses. He opened the door at once, still wrapping his blanket around him. "Yes? What is it?" He held up a taper to see who his caller was.

His face fell when he recognized Argyros. "So soon as this, eh?" he said, and did not wait for a reply. He hesitated, then went on, "You'd better come in. I have some wine that could use drinking."

Riario filled and lit several lamps in his living room, threw a couple of robes from a chair to the floor, and waved the magistrianos into it. The rest of the room was as strewn with clothes, books, and medical

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oddments. Men who live alone are usually very neat or anything but. The doctor was of the latter group.

"Here." He put an earthenware jug in front of Argyros and got one like it for himself. He did not bother with cups. "Drink," he said.

Argyros drank. Like a sponge, his grief sucked up the wine and left him all but untouched. He put down the jar. "Why?" he cried, a groan that filled the room.

"Ask God when you come before Him in judgment," Riario said. "I intend to. He'd best have a good answer, too, or I'll make Him pay. One day I had a wife I loved, two daughters I couldn't afford to dowry, and a face I didn't mind seeing in a mirror. A couple of weeks later . . . but you know about that."

"Yes, I know about that." Argyros drank deep. After a while, he went on, "I wish I would have caught it too. Why am I here and untouched, when they're gone?" He rubbed at the backs of his hands.

"*Never* wish you had smallpox," Riario said, most seriously. "Never. Poison yourself if you want, or jump off a building, but never wish that on yourself. Be thankful you don't know what you're talking about."

His eyes bored into the magistrianos, seeming to glow in the lamplight. Abashed by the force of that stare, Argyros raised the winejar to his lips again. Riario's glance shifted. Even after he had been drinking, he missed very little. His eyebrows shot upward. He whispered, "Be careful what you wish for. You may get it."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Look at your hands, fool!"

Setting down the jug, the magistrianos did. He felt his heart stumble with fear. On his fingers and the backs of his hands were several of the hateful red blotches he had come to know so well. A couple were already turning into blisters.

"It's impossible!" he burst out. "I'm not sick!"

Riario stood beside him, felt his forehead, took his pulse with sure, careful fingers. "You're *not* sick," he agreed at last. It sounded like an accusation; the doctor was scowling. "Why aren't you? Those are smallpox sores. Why don't you have more of them?"

"I don't know." Absurdly, Argyros felt guilty.

Riario kept poking and prodding at him, trying to figure out why he was not worse. He could not fathom it himself. He had watched the smallpox lesions disfigure Helen before they killed her, had seen them devour his son, and here he had this harmless handful. If God was giving him his wish, it was a mocking gift.

Then he smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand. "I'm a fool!"

"I'm willing to believe it," Riario said, "but why do you say so?"

"I don't think I have smallpox at all."

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"What are those, then?" The doctor jerked his chin at the blisters on Argyros' hands.

"What did the dairyman call it when his little boy had it? Cowpox, that's what it was. I milked cows a couple of times, getting milk for Sergios."

"You're right, and I'm the one who's the fool." Riario shook his head in chagrin. "I've seen cowpox often enough, on milkmaids and such scared spitless they had smallpox instead. It's just that now, with so much of the real sickness everywhere, I naturally thought of it first and didn't even worry about the other."

Still grumbling to himself, the doctor left the room. He came back with two jugs. "That calls for more wine."

"I don't want to drink to celebrate," the magistrianos said.

"Then drink to drink, or drink for oblivion, or drink to stay with me, because I intend to. Just drink." Riario used a scalpel to cut into the pitch sealing the winejar's cork, worked it free, raised the jar to his mouth and tipped his head back.

Argyros followed suit. At last the sweet wine began to reach him. He stared owlishly toward Riario. "What the devil good are you miserable doctors, if you can't even cure anybody who falls sick?"

Riario did not get angry. Instead, he buried his head in his hands. "How I wish we could. Give us what credit we deserve, though: we set bones, we tend cuts and burns, sometimes we even do some good with the knife."

The magistrianos nodded. "Oh, aye, I've seen all that in the army. But I've also seen campaigns fail before they started because half the men went down with a bloody flux, and nothing anyone could do about it."

"Yes, I know; those things happen." Riario hesitated, then continued slowly, seeming to reveal a long-cherished dream at which he feared Argyros would jeer: "What I really wish is that we could do something about disease before it started."

Indeed, the magistrianos had all he could do not to burst into derisive laughter. "How would you do that?"

"How do I know?" Riario said irritably. "I keep thinking of King Mithridates of Pontos—you know, the one who gave Rome such a fight in the time of Sulla and Pompey. He made himself so immune to poisons by taking lots of small doses that when he really needed to kill himself he had to get one of his mercenaries to do it for him."

"Wonderful," Argyros said. "Where are you going to get a little dose of the disease? And—"

He stopped, his mouth hanging open. He thought of Peter Skleros, his plump happy wife, and their eight children, all healthy while smallpox raged through Constantinople. He thought of the cowpox marks he had

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seen on small Peter—and surely the rest of the family would have had that ailment too. He thought of Riario's own words, of how people coming down with cowpox were afraid they had smallpox.

"By the Virgin and the saints," he whispered.

"What?" Riario still sounded as though he regretted bringing his vision out where the magistrianos could see it.

Then, stammering, his tongue thick with wine, Argyros set his own insight before the doctor. When he was done, he waited for Riario to call him an idiot.

He watched Riario's hands slowly curl into fists. His face took on an expression Argyros did not recognize for a moment. Then he remembered his army days, and suddenly riding into a clearing where a wildcat was stalking a squirrel. The cat had borne that same look of hungry concentration.

"To hit back, oh, to hit back," Riario breathed. "Do you realize the weapon you'll have put into physicians' hands if you're right, Argyros?"

"If I'm right," the magistrianos repeated. "How could you find out?"

"I know what I'd like to do," Riario replied at once: "dab some pus from a smallpox sore into a cut on somebody who's already had cowpox. If the poor sod didn't come down with smallpox after that, he never would."

"I thought you would say that. Do it."

"With whom?" the doctor asked scornfully. "Who'd be madman enough to take a chance like that?"

"I would," Argyros said.

"Don't be a jackass, man. If you're wrong, you take the disease for real, not just in your foolish wishes."

The magistrianos spread his hands. "Why should I care? My life is in ruins anyhow."

"That's the wine talking, and your sorrow."

"In the morning I'll be sober, and tell you the same thing. As for my sorrow . . . if I live to be old as Methusaleh, I'll never lose it. *You* should know that."

Riario flinched, grimaced, reluctantly nodded. All the same, he said, "Go home and go to bed. If you're fool enough to come back in the morning, well, we'll talk about it. If not, I can't blame you, that's for certain."

Argyros did not want to go home; the memories of the past weeks were too bitter for him to think he would ever want to live in that house again. In the end, his legs decided the matter. They might as well have been jelly when he tried to rise. His head spun like Scylla's whirlpool. He slumped back into his chair and passed out.

When he woke, his pounding head made him think he had died and

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gone to hell. He groaned, and then groaned again at hearing his own voice.

Riario was moving about; listening to him hurt. The doctor said, "There are two cures for a hangover. One is raw cabbage, the other a bit more wine. Cabbage always makes me belch. Here."

Argyros thought his queasy stomach would reject the cup Riario pressed on him, but the wine stayed down. After a while, he began to feel human, in a melancholy way.

Riario's haggard look and red-tracked eyes said he was suffering too. He picked up a chunk of bread, shuddered, put it down again. "I'm getting too old for this kind of thing."

"I'm half your age, and I was too old years ago." The magistrianos sat bolt upright, and regretted it. "The smallpox!"

Riario regarded him with bleary curiosity. "You still want to go ahead?"

"I said I would, didn't I? I remember that. It's one of the last things I *do* remember."

"Let me look at you," Riario said, and took the magistrianos' hands in his own. Argyros looked with him. Clean brown scabs were already forming over the cowpox blisters. The doctor grunted. "Aye, you're healing from it. Come along, then. If you're after a nameless grave in the cemetery of Pelagios with the other suicides, I'll help put you there."

"If you were so sure that was going to happen, you wouldn't try this," Argyros said.

"I suppose not. But then, *I* wouldn't try it unless I was certain I'd miss the disease."

Having had the last word, Riario paced the house, waiting for someone to report a new case of smallpox. He began to grumble; by this time yesterday, he had been wanted in three places at once. But noon was still a long way away when a woman began pounding on the door, crying, "My husband! Come quick! The pox has seized my husband!"

Argyros and Riario both screwed up their faces at the bright morning sunshine. Lost in her own concern, the woman never noticed. She unquestioningly accepted Argyros as another doctor.

The magistrianos' stomach almost rebelled when he stood by the sick man's bed. The fellow reminded him too sharply of what he had gone through with Helen and Sergios. Smallpox lesions covered his face and limbs; as yet, they held clear fluid, not pus. "Will he live?" Argyros asked: quietly, so the man's wife, who was sobbing in the next room, would not hear.

"He may well," Riario answered. "The fever's not as high as it often is, and his pulse is very strong."

He eyed the magistrianos. Argyros willed himself to nod.

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The doctor pulled a scalpel from his bag; Argyros thought it was the same one he had used to open the wine the night before. He made a small cut in the side of the magistrianos' right thumb. Argyros nearly jerked his hand away. Holding still to be deliberately injured, he found, was harder in some ways than going into battle.

Humming tunelessly, Riario pierced a couple of the sick man's blisters with the scalpel. He pressed the liquid from them into the wound he had made on Argyros' hand, wrapped a bandage around it. He gave the scalpel a thoughtful look. "If this has smallpox poison on it, I suppose I ought to wash it before I use it again."

He went out a few minutes later, to tell the sick man's wife to do all the things Argyros had done for Helen: bathe him against the fever, keep him quiet—all the palliatives that did no harm, and not much good, either. They did not pretend to cure.

His thumb had begun to throb. It did not matter. If he was right, here was something better than a cure, for anyone who had once had cowpox would never get smallpox at all.

If he was wrong—well, Riario had already spelled out what would happen if he was wrong. One way or the other, he would know soon.

His visits to Riario became a daily ritual. The doctor would examine him, feel to see if he had a fever, check his pulse. Then Riario would growl, "Still alive, I'd say," give him a cup of wine—a *small* cup of wine—and send him home again.

The routine gave him something around which his life could coalesce once more. So did his work, to which he returned about a week after Sergios died. The corps of magistrianoi was still badly shorthanded, with some members dead and other mourning loved ones or caring for the sick. The amount of things to be done, though, remained the same. Exhaustion was an anodyne hardly less potent than wine.

After three weeks, only a pale scar remained from the cut on Argyros' thumb. He began to lose patience with Riario's stock phrase. "Think I'm likely to stay that way?" he asked pointedly.

"Oh, yes, I've thought so for some time," the doctor said. "There is another problem, though: for all we know, you may have been immune to smallpox even before you got the cowpox. You nursed your wife and son without catching it, you know."

Argyros stared at him, appalled. He felt betrayed. "Then what I did was worthless?"

"No, no, no, no. You're part of a proof, but only part. I've done some checking lately. Did you know that it's not just the Skleroi who escaped smallpox, but almost all the dairy families in the city?"

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"No, but that would make sense, wouldn't it? They'd be the ones most likely to get cowpox first instead."

"So they would. That's really what decided me you'd guessed right, whether you yourself were immune or not. By now, I've given cowpox to a couple dozen people, and tried to give them smallpox afterwards."

"And?" Argyros wanted to reach over and shake the answer out of Riario. "By the Virgin, tell me this instant how they are!"

The doctor grinned his lopsided grin. "Still alive, I'd say."

"Then if, say, the city prefect made everyone in Constantinople come forward to get a dose of cowpox, or if babies got it not long after they were born—"

"—None of those people would come down with smallpox later," Riario finished for the magistrianos. "That's my best guess. I've already started telling other doctors, too. The word will spread."

Awe on his face, Argyros crossed himself and bent his head in prayer.

"Here, what's all this in aid of?" Riario demanded after the magistrianos had spent several silent minutes.

"I was apologizing to the Lord for daring to question His will," Argyros answered humbly. "Now at last I see His purpose in the anguish He sent me and those I love—loved." Purpose or no, that correction brought sorrow with it. Argyros quickly went on, "Had they not been taken ill, I never would have stumbled across the truth that will save so many more from a like fate. Truly I am but an instrument of His will."

"Oh, hogwash," the doctor said. "What of all the others who got sick and died in the epidemic? If God killed all of them just so two would draw your attention, He strikes me as bloody wasteful."

"No," said Argyros. "Consider—were many people not sick, I would have gone to a wetnurse instead of a dairy, and never learned of cowpox. But I was afraid to bring a wetnurse into the house, and so I met Peter Skleros and his family."

"Everyone in Constantinople thinks he's a theologian," Riario grumbled. "Pure foolishness, if you ask me."

"I didn't," the magistrianos said shortly. He could not bear to think Helen and Sergios had died in vain, for no purpose at all.

But then he begged Riario's pardon. He would not have noticed the relationship between cowpox and smallpox without the doctor, either. In years to come, physicians would not have to grow so hard-shelled, so cynical, for they would have a true weapon against one deadly scourge of mankind. It might even keep some of them from despairing of God and going to hell.

Argyros did not mention that thought to Riario. He knew what the doctor would say about it. ●

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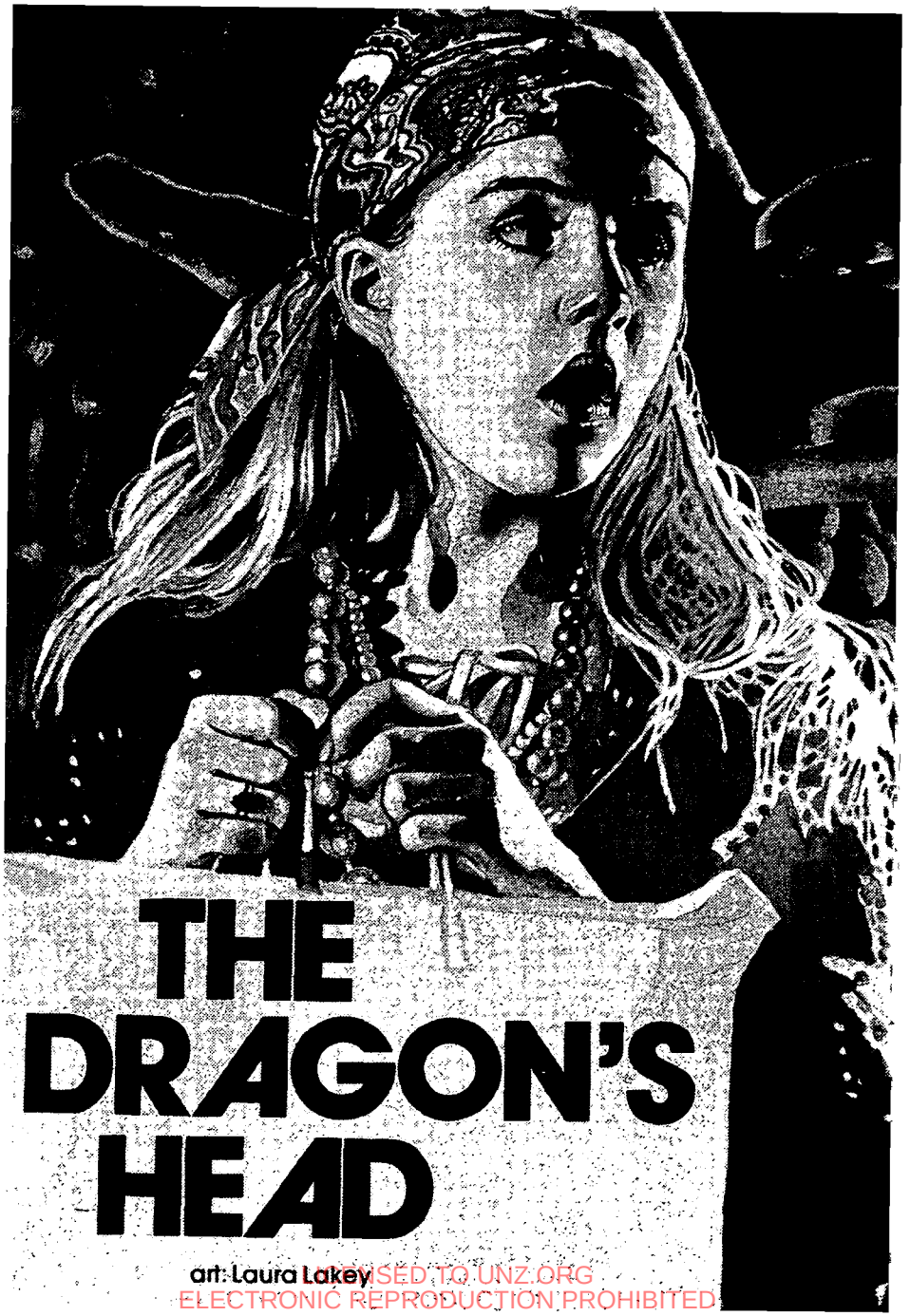

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by Karen Joy Fowler

Karen Joy Fowler's short story collection, *Artificial Things*, will be published late in 1986 by Bantam/Spectra. It will contain a number of the delightful fantasies she has published in *IAsfm* as well as the excellent pieces she has published in *F&SF* and *The Writers of the Future* anthology. A new story of hers will also appear in Jack Dann and Jeanne Van Buren Dann's Vietnam collection, *In the Fields of Fire*, which will be published by Tor Books in January 1987.

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Halloween, 1955

Mrs. McLaughlin was terribly old. Penny's father said that she was living in that same house, already an old woman, when he was a boy. No wonder she was eccentric, he implied, as if she were the kind of harmless old woman who knits.

Clifton Bell, a classmate of Penny's, said Mrs. McLaughlin was a witch. She looked like one, all right, with her bony elbows, that cloud of thin, white hair, and those strange fogged eyes. Mrs. McLaughlin was often out working in her roses during those times of the day when children passed by on their way to or from school. Occasionally she would seize some child in a grip kept strong by gardening or some supernatural force. She would lean her face into the child's face, asking "Who are you? What's your name?" without listening to the answer as her victim twisted to get away. "You wouldn't steal the apples from an old woman's tree, would you?" she might continue, in a voice of dreadful amusement. "Oh, no. Not you. You wouldn't strip a vine of nice, fat tomatoes. Must have been the crows." And truthfully, it must have been. Not a child in the school would have eaten anything from Mrs. McLaughlin's garden, much less gone in to get it. Penny never even walked down her side of the street.

Penny was not a cowardly child. She could hold worms in her bare palm and thought of snakes merely as bigger worms. She liked to play in the basement. Its cobwebs, small, gritty windows, and damp corners made it a wonderful landscape for all sorts of games. She was not afraid of the dark. But the thought of witches did give her an uncomfortable, shivery feeling in her stomach and a coldness at the base of her neck and this was really her mother's fault for letting her go to see "The Wizard of Oz," when she was only five years old. Her mother's memories of the movie had centered on Judy Garland—the ruby slippers, the charming voice, the surprising moment when black and white turned into Technicolor. She had forgotten how effective the performance of the witch was. Penny had slept between her parents that night and had suffered from nightmares for several nights afterwards. A tree outside her room cast moon shadows through the windows; the shapes of the branches distorted into long, extended hands.

Penny had confided these fears to Clifton Bell while they were still friends and it was really unfair that he would taunt her with them now that they were not. "Go play with Clifton," Penny's mother would suggest when she grew tired of having Penny underfoot. Penny had not played with Clifton in more than a year, but Penny's mother never seemed to notice. Clifton only played with boys now and Penny was practically a boy herself but Clifton didn't care. Couldn't she hit a baseball out of her

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own yard and into Mr. Sillman's? How many boys could do that? Mr. Sillman was their neighbor and their postman. He would deliver the ball back to them with their mail. "Hell of a swing she's got," he would say to Penny's mother and then apologize quickly for his language. "I'm going to tell the Yankees." And wasn't her mother always complaining about the state of her clothes or her knees or her hair? "I might as well have had a boy," Penny's mother would say, looking her over and shaking her head.

Penny's personal opinion was that she was a boy trapped inside the body of a girl. She had heard this interesting phrase at her mother's bridge party. Maggie Cantor had been telling the women about her cousin from Chicago who should have been married this week, but the wedding had to be cancelled when her fiancé turned out to be a woman, too. "Angie is just as pretty as a picture," Maggie said, over her coffee. "Just as sweet as they come. And the invitations are already out and they have tickets to New York for their honeymoon and her fiancé says there's something she'd better know before the wedding. Thoughtful, wasn't she? Well, did you ever hear anything like it?"

Penny's mother was celebrated for her levelheadedness. "No, I never did," she'd said. "Do you really believe it?" and then noticing, suddenly, how quiet the house was, called out "Penny?" Penny had answered reluctantly, aware that she was closer than she should have been during such an adult conversation. "Go and play with Clifton," Penny's mother had told her, and while Penny was standing on the porch, the door just creaking shut behind her, she had heard one more scrap of conversation . . . "a boy trapped inside the body of a girl" . . . and had not known for sure whether the words referred to her or to Angie's fiancé.

Down the street Clifton and Brian Goodman were repairing Clifton's treehouse. Penny had ambled through her own yard, stopping to catch and release a ladybug, to chew the sour petals of a buttercup, to look briefly for four-leaf clovers. It was practically by accident that she ended up under Clifton's tree. He looked efficient and capable, hammering a new nail into a cross-piece. "Can I help?" Penny had offered and he had reminded her that she was a girl.

"So what?" she'd said angrily. "I'm as good as any boy" and she'd grown even angrier when she saw Clifton smile at Brian. Clifton's right hand, the one which held the hammer, dropped back against his leg. He leaned onto the narrowing trunk, one foot resting on a branch slightly higher than the other foot. Brian was stretched out on the platform of the treehouse. He inched forward so that Penny could see his face, white among the leafless branches. "I can do anything any boy can do," Penny had added.

"Oh, really," said Clifton. "Well, Brian and I were just remembering

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what we did last Halloween and you could never do it. Right, Brian?" He glanced up at Brian who smiled, his eyes narrowing from the movement of his mouth. Perhaps he nodded his head. The head was all Penny could see of him and so she wasn't really sure. But the way he stayed there, looking down at her, was irritating.

"I could, too," she'd said. "If you did it, I can do it."

Clifton raised his hammer and went back to work. He paused between blows. "Promise?" he asked casually.

Penny'd had her first moment of doubt. "Promise."

"It was nothing really," said Clifton. "We went trick-or-treating at old lady McLaughlin's." Brian laughed aloud. Clifton looked at Penny. "So, I'll pick you up. Halloween." And Penny had walked away with those cold, fluttery feelings, wincing every time she heard the hammer hit the nail.

The days before Halloween passed slowly, like a nightmare she woke up to each morning. Everyone at school knew that she was going trick-or-treating at Mrs. McLaughlin's all alone to prove she was as good as any boy. Penny could see no way out unless she got sick and even then it would have to be something like chicken pox that everyone could see. Penny had always thought being a boy would be easy until this week when she faced the prospect of being as brave as one.

"Are you really?" Shelley asked at recess, her own face tight with sympathy. "I wouldn't for *anything*. I'd die of fright."

"Don't," Marybeth told her shortly. "You don't have to, Penny."

"Penny's not afraid," Clifton told them, his smile angelic. "Are you, Penny?"

The cold flutters moved into Penny's throat and solidified there, like a stone she had swallowed until it stuck. Eating was impossible. She moved her food around her plate, but her mother was not fooled. "What's wrong?" she asked Penny.

"Nothing."

"I can see there's something. Maybe I could help."

Penny wound spaghetti around her fork until she had a coil too big to fit her mouth. "Are there witches?" she asked finally. "I mean, I know there aren't the kind who fly around on broomsticks, but is there another kind?"

"No." Her mother's voice was assured. "No such thing."

"Remember," said her father, leaning forward and pinching her nose, "this is the same woman who told you there *was* a Santa Claus."

"Ed!" Her mother was irritated. "Can't you see she's serious?" She turned back to Penny. "What's all this about?"

"Mrs. McLaughlin."

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"Oh." Penny's mother set her fork down and wiped the corners of her mouth with her napkin. She shook her head at Penny. "I hope you children aren't planning some sort of Halloween prank on that poor old woman."

"Oh, no," Penny assured her. A prank? On Mrs. McLaughlin? What a dream world her mother lived in. "It's just that some of the kids in my class think she's a witch. She *is* creepy looking."

"She's awfully old," said Penny's father. "I wouldn't be surprised if she was a hundred. She was already old and living in that same house when I—"

"There's no such thing as witches," Penny's mother interrupted.

"There's no such thing as witches," Penny told herself at night when the branches of her tree, once more denuded of the leaves which blurred their forms all summer, reached their shadows to her through the glass. "There's no such thing as witches," she told her concerned classmates at school who agreed with her hastily. "There's no such thing as witches," she said to Clifton who did not look convinced.

He shrugged. "I'll pick you up Halloween," he said. "We'll see, right?"

He was the first one to ring their doorbell Halloween night. Penny's mother put a tootsie roll in his bag. "Come in, Clifton," she said. "We haven't seen you in so long."

Penny could tell Clifton was annoyed by the ease with which her mother had recognized him. He was costumed as Dracula and had smeared himself with green make-up as well as inserting a set of false teeth. Penny was a gypsy in a long skirt and gold bracelets. She wore her mother's blouse and a heavy jacket underneath it which gave her figure an odd, lumpy look. It was a cold night, with an even colder wind.

A group of children waited for them outside. "We're going straight to the Murphys'," Clifton told her, removing his teeth. "We'll wait on the porch there while you go to old lady McLaughlin's. You sure you want to go through with this?"

The Murphys lived on the other side of the street and two houses down. Too far away if she should need help. "Fine," Penny answered, "*if* you're afraid to get any closer."

"Hey, I did this last year." Clifton's face was triumphantly green. "She's gonna grab you. Just like the witch in Hansel and Gretel. Lucky for you you're so skinny."

Penny went on from the Murphys alone. Her heartbeat was hard and high; she felt her throat contract and expand around it. It made breathing difficult. Her empty bag slipped from her cold fingers in the middle of the street and she stooped to pick it up. The shapes of the parked cars became mammalian.

Mrs. McLaughlin's house was set far back from the street at the end

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of a gravel path. Penny counted the steps she took to get to the porch. Forty-two. Her bracelets jangled with each step; her shoes scrunched through the gravel. Up three stairs and onto the wooden porch. One of the boards was warped and creaked underfoot. Step. Step. Step. Penny forced herself to raise her empty hand. She made a fist and she knocked.

There were lights inside, but no one came. She knocked again, slightly louder. Still no one. Penny felt relief wash warmly over her. Mrs. McLaughlin had gone out. Mrs. McLaughlin was not coming. She turned to leave, then heard the doorhandle catch and the door open behind her. Turning back she saw Mrs. McLaughlin standing in the yellow light from inside. Mrs. McLaughlin had a towel around her shoulders; her hair was wet and dripped onto it. Her face was unfriendly.

"Trick or treat." Penny's voice was hoarse and expressionless.

"Who are you, child?" Mrs. McLaughlin asked sharply. She waved one hand in front of her face as if something were preventing her from seeing.

"Trick or treat," said Penny again, in a whisper.

There was a long silence. "Wait here," said Mrs. McLaughlin at last, closing the door. Penny didn't want to wait. Neither did she want to turn her back to the door and start down the steps. There was something horrifying in the notion that Mrs. McLaughlin might come at her from behind. She took a couple of small steps backwards. The door opened again. "I'm supposed to give you something, am I?" Mrs. McLaughlin's question held the hint of an accent, more of a difference in inflection than pronunciation. Mrs. McLaughlin held out her hands. "Put these in your bag." She gave Penny five walnuts and three old copies of *The Reader's Digest*.

"Thank you," said Penny, and then Mrs. McLaughlin's right hand reached out farther and closed over Penny's arm. Penny found herself looking directly into the opaque eyes; a scream began to push its way up into her throat. Before it surfaced, Mrs. McLaughlin released her. She stroked Penny's cheek with her warm, dry hand. The bag rattled in Penny's shaking fingers.

"Come back tomorrow," said Mrs. McLaughlin, "and I'll give you something else. Something very special."

Penny began to edge away from her without turning around. "Will you come? Don't forget." Mrs. McLaughlin shook her head, water flew from it. "I have something for you."

"All right," Penny said and watched the door shut.

She returned quickly to the Murphys' front porch. "What did she say?" Shelley asked. "Weren't you scared?"

"What did she give you?" said Clifton.

"Some nuts and some old magazines. What did you get last year?"

"Same thing." Clifton's tone was casual. "What a weird old lady."

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"She told me to come back," Penny said. "She says she'll give me something else tomorrow."

Clifton replaced his teeth and chewed on them thoughtfully. When he spoke again, the words were slightly slurred, but his voice was quiet and friendly. "You don't have to do that," he said.

Her mother said the same thing next morning when, having stuffed herself with Baby Ruths and candy corns, Penny was trying to face a breakfast of scrambled eggs. Holding her fork irresolutely in one hand, Penny told her mother she had been to Mrs. McLaughlin's the night before. "She must be a very interesting lady," her mother answered. "Mr. Sillman says her father was a missionary and she's lived all over the world. She showed him her stamp collection once. I bet she could tell some fascinating stories." She scraped a thin layer of Welch's jelly over her toast and looked at Penny's face. "You don't have to go, darling," she said gently. "Even if you said you would. By today she's probably forgotten she asked you."

"She said she had something to give me."

"She's probably forgotten that, too."

So Penny thought she probably wouldn't until she got to school and found that the prestige she had gained the evening before was practically forgotten by the afternoon. "You were okay last night," Clifton told her and his very capitulation was irritating. He went to play basketball and left her with the other girls.

"I'm visiting her again today," Penny announced loudly, in his presence. "She invited me. She wants to give me something special."

"I still think she's creepy," Marybeth said. "And you were scared last night. I could tell. Even afterwards."

"Well, I'm not scared now," Penny told her. "She's going to give me something. She said it was very special." They speculated on the gift, guessing it would be jewelry, an heirloom, perhaps brought back from the Orient and very valuable. Poor Mrs. McLaughlin had no one else to give her treasures to.

Mrs. McLaughlin was out in the garden when Penny arrived. If she had not been, Penny might have skipped the visit, after all. The last hour of school, during a spelling bee in which Penny had stumbled on the word "vice-president" since she had thought surely it would be capitalized, Penny had suffered a slight return of those symptoms which had plagued her all week. "Something special"—it could mean anything. It could be horrible. But Mrs. McLaughlin was clearly expecting her. She tucked the pruning shears into her garden basket with a shake of her head. "They should have all been cut back weeks ago," she told Penny. "I just can't seem to keep up with things these days." Penny looked at the roses which, despite Mrs. McLaughlin's continual care, looked as

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leggy and unkempt as her hair. "Come inside, child," Mrs. McLaughlin said. "I'll make us some tea."

She led Penny over the porch, through the hall, and into a small, musty living room, then excused herself to go and heat the water. The room was crowded with all manner of exotic bric-a-brac and smelled of dust and medicine. There were carved elephants, trunks raised in permanent alarm; smooth wooden Madonnas; and long strips of bright material embroidered with mirrors. There were shelves of blue and white china and, on the walls, two watercolors of pale herons, and a large brass platter with the raised figures of sailors on a boat with a square sail.

When the tea was ready, Mrs. McLaughlin called Penny into the dining room, put two thin cushions on a chair to give her just a little more height and handed her a small, round cup half filled with cream. Mrs. McLaughlin poured tea over the cream and disappeared again. When she returned she had a sleepy, gray kitten in one hand. "Perhaps you might like a cat to hold," she said, dropping it into Penny's lap where it curled against her palm and slept as if unaware it had even been moved.

Penny took a cookie with her other hand and ate it. Mrs. McLaughlin had put on a bright blue Oriental housecoat with embroidery and loose sleeves. She gestured meaninglessly over her cup. Her excessive sleeves gave her hands a curiously unsupported look. They floated free as birds in the steam. The continual movement made Penny uneasy.

"He's a lovely kitten," she said.

Mrs. McLaughlin did not respond. Penny sipped at her tea. She had never had tea before and found it neither pleasant nor unpleasant. She preferred Kool-aid, though. "My mother says you've traveled so much you must have seen many fascinating things," Penny said at last.

"I've seen a woman burned to death," said Mrs. McLaughlin, not looking at Penny, but turning her strange eyes inward. "I saw her thrown into the flames. I saw her face when she felt the fire." She sat for a moment, then her eyes cleared suddenly. "That was in India where I was born. Not really a story for a young girl, of course. I don't suppose that's what you meant."

Penny looked down at the kitten. When she looked up again Mrs. McLaughlin's face had taken on a rather sly look. "I was thinking of the dragon, actually," she said, her eyes fixed upon Penny who stared back. "That's what made me remember it. The dragon who has two heads and one of them is fog and one of them is fire."

The kitten stretched in Penny's lap, but Mrs. McLaughlin never shifted her eyes. There was an uncomfortable silence. "I was thinking about its two heads," Mrs. McLaughlin repeated, looking pleased. "Have you ever seen the dragon?"

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"No," said Penny.

"Of course you haven't. It's too big to be seen. Just pieces of it, sometimes. Sometimes." Mrs. McLaughlin paused to take a sip of her tea. "I've seen the breasts of birds," she added, "brighter than their backs. When you see something all lit up from below like that you know it can't be the sun. It has to be the dragon's breath." She drained her small cup in a few gulps. "Drink your tea," she said. "Drink it all and tell me what you see."

Penny drank and uncovered the form of a dragon, painted in the bottom of her cup. She laughed in surprise and Mrs. McLaughlin smiled at her. "He's only got one head," Penny pointed out.

Mrs. McLaughlin made a gesture of dismissal with one of her hands. "The man who painted that never saw the dragon. I told you it was too big to be seen. And it does have two heads, I promise you. Like yin and yang." Mrs. McLaughlin's sly look returned. "When does one person have two heads?" she asked. "It's a riddle. It's the dragon's riddle."

"I don't know," said Penny.

"And I won't tell you. It's one of the rules. A person has to solve the dragon's riddle for herself." Mrs. McLaughlin began to rock slightly, back and forth in her chair. Her gaze went inward again. "You don't see the dragon coming. But it gets you. Then you find out, it's had you all along."

Penny set the kitten down on the rug. It yawned prettily, showing its tiny, pointed teeth. "I've had a lovely time," she said carefully. "Thank you for the tea." She stood to show she was going home now. Mrs. McLaughlin continued to rock. "Mrs. McLaughlin?" There was no response. "Mrs. McLaughlin? You said you'd give me something."

Mrs. McLaughlin smiled. "I already have."

"Oh. Of course," said Penny quickly, trying not to sound disappointed. It was the tea, then, or perhaps the conversation. Grown-ups were always giving you advice, as if anything could be less of a gift. But Mrs. McLaughlin gestured downwards.

"It's the kitten, of course," she said. "If you want him. I've never had a sweeter one. And if it's all right with Mum."

"Oh!" Penny retrieved the kitten gently. "Oh, thank you, Mrs. McLaughlin. He's lovely . . . I love him . . . thank you!"

Penny named the kitten Smoke. She stopped by Mrs. McLaughlin's the next day to tell her so, but Mrs. McLaughlin wouldn't answer the door. Penny could see her inside, through the living room window, wrapped in an afghan by the fireplace, staring into the flames. She knocked repeatedly, but Mrs. McLaughlin ignored her.

"Perhaps she didn't hear you," Penny's mother suggested. "She's so awfully old."

"She heard fine on Halloween and she was washing her hair," Penny

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objected. "She heard fine when we were talking." Smoke attacked Penny's shoelace, his small tail twitching with menace. They watched the struggle. Now Smoke was on top. Now the shoelace had flipped him onto his back and pinned him there.

Penny's father laughed. "How did Mrs. McLaughlin seem," he asked, "when you were talking?"

"She was nice. But real strange." Penny rescued her cat. "She made me tea, you know. And . . . she told me she'd seen a woman burned to death."

"Did she?"

"Really! In India, she said." Penny stroked Smoke's chin to hold him still. "Do you think it could have been a witch? Didn't they used to burn witches?"

"Penny," her mother sighed. "Listen to me. No witches. Not now. Not ever. Many years ago innocent, ordinary women were accused of witchcraft and burned for it. Or drowned. It was a tragedy caused by ignorance and it happened a very long time ago."

"A hundred years?" asked Penny. "Like when Mrs. McLaughlin was a little girl?"

"More like three hundred. And not in India. At least, I don't think so. Mrs. McLaughlin is old enough to be confused about such things. Don't let it worry you."

"It is always women they're burning, though," said Penny's father. "Did you ever notice that? Witches and female military geniuses and unfaithful queens."

"Who are you thinking of?" Penny's mother asked. "Queens get decapitated."

"What does that mean?" said Penny. Her parents turned to her, both at once. She thought her mother seemed slightly surprised by the question, as though she had forgotten, just for the moment, that Penny was there. "What does that mean, 'decapitated'?" Penny repeated.

Her father grinned at her, drawing his index finger across his throat slowly. " 'Off with her head,' the red queen said."

Penny's mother looked at him disapprovingly. It made him laugh. "Hangings," he said, heartily. "Now, there's a punishment for a man. Why did the executioner want to examine the corpses?"

"Ed." Penny's mother's tone was a warning. Her father ignored it.

"He wanted to make sure they were well—"

"Ed!" said Penny's mother. But when she left to start dinner she was smiling.

The next day Mrs. McLaughlin was dead. Clifton told her so on the playground before school. He lowered his scarf from his face to talk and his breath ghosted into the air around his mouth.

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"Dead for days," he said. "They just found her body."

Penny felt a horrible sensation in her stomach as though she might throw up. "I saw her yesterday," she told him. "Sitting in her chair."

"No. She was dead then."

Penny turned and ran home. She stayed on the Murphys' side of the street and moved as fast as the layers of winter clothing permitted, as fast as she was able with tears fogging her vision and soaking into the knitted muffler at her neck. Her mother caught her as she came through the door and held her, trembling.

"Penny . . . Penny . . . what's wrong? What happened?"

Penny was sobbing so she could hardly answer. "Mrs. McLaughlin," she said.

Her mother petted her hair. "Yes. Mr. Sillman was just telling me. Honey, when someone very old like that dies, there's something right and natural about it."

"You don't understand. I saw her! Yesterday! I saw her ghost!"

"Nonsense. Who's been telling you such rubbish?" Penny's mother held her away to look at her face. "Mr. Sillman says they found her in the backyard just this morning. He thinks she froze out there, but it's possible her heart just stopped. In any case it must have happened some time last night." Her mother pulled Penny into her again and held her tightly. "She'd had a long, long life and she didn't suffer. You mustn't be upset."

"Clifton said she'd been dead for days."

"Nonsense," her mother repeated. "She died last night."

"How do you know?"

Her mother's voice was firm. "Mainly because of you. You saw her yesterday in her living room. How can you, of all people, have any doubts about it?" Her words were exasperated, but her tone was merely sad. She held onto Penny until Penny's body began to relax and the sobbing stopped. Then she gave Penny a kiss on the forehead. "You know," she said, "ever since I heard, I've been asking myself why I wasn't a better friend to her. Why none of us ever visited her the way you did. Why I never took her my Christmas bread the way I do all the other neighbors. I simply never thought to. That poor, lonely old lady."

Penny looked up at her mother's face. It looked older, sagged at the mouth and her eyes were red. That large wet spot near her mother's breast—Penny had made that with her tears. But her mother was crying, too. Penny had never seen her mother cry before. Her mother had hardly known Mrs. McLaughlin; she had just finished saying so. Why was she crying? Her mother returned the stare. "Do you want to know something amazing?" she offered. "Mr. Sillman says she has a daughter. They found her address in Mrs. McLaughlin's desk. She lives in England. Mr. Sillman can't understand how Mrs. McLaughlin even came to have the address.

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He's been delivering her mail for twenty years and he says there's never been a letter from England."

"Who will take care of her cats?" Penny asked.

"I imagine the neighbors will keep them. We didn't do much else for her; I guess everyone's feeling a bit guilty. Her daughter will get the house and everything else, I suppose. Strange to think, she must be quite an old lady herself." Her mother touched Penny on the cheek. "I'm going to put you back to bed, darling. Let's skip school this morning, shall we? You can go after lunch if you feel like it."

And Penny found she actually was tired in spite of having just gotten up. She lay in bed with Smoke until his purring became the dragon's hoarse and even breathing in her dreams.

Later, it felt odd to be walking back to school all by herself with the sun high and the streets deserted of children. She heard the sounds of her own steps and walked more and more slowly. When she was opposite Mrs. McLaughlin's house she stopped. Everything looked just the same. You'd think a dead person's house would be different, Penny thought. You'd think there'd be some sign. Penny crossed the street. She stood at the edge of the walk and stared into the living room window. It was too far away to see inside. Penny was frightened, but no more so than she'd been on Halloween and she'd gone to the house then. She started up the walk.

A rose branch caught at her sleeve. Poor Mrs. McLaughlin never had finished her pruning. Penny reached out to detach herself and there, by her hand, was an unseasonal bud. Penny stretched her fingers toward it, but it began to open in front of her eyes. The bud twisted, then shook itself loose. It was red and perfect and then, just a moment later—Penny had hardly had time to admire it—it was past perfection; it was overblown. Instead of dropping, the petals shriveled from their outer edges in as if they had been set on fire.

When the flower was black and dead Penny touched it, her hand trembling so she made the petals fall.

It was a message from Mrs. McLaughlin; Mrs. McLaughlin was speaking to Penny in the voice of her garden and if the message was enigmatic and confusing, well, all of Mrs. McLaughlin's words had been riddles to Penny. But one part of it was clear. I am here, Mrs. McLaughlin said. I am still here and this was not frightening to Penny at all, it was comforting.

If I went all the way up to the window and looked in, Penny thought, I could see her sitting in her chair just like yesterday and this was so obviously true Penny never needed to actually do it.

For years afterwards, whenever she sat and looked into a fire, she saw the petals of roses bloom and then wither in the flames.

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Penny's husband turned off the television and came to lie beside her. He raised her nightgown and ran his hands over the globe her stomach had become. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

Penny stroked his hair. "I was just thinking that this is an awfully old-fashioned way to have a baby. I can't believe that in all this time they haven't found a way to shorten the procedure. Why can't I just send to Detroit for the most recent model? Why can't Disney collapse the whole thing through the miracle of time lapse photography?" She circled his ear with her fingers. "It's a boy," she told him.

"You're very sure of yourself. Woman's intuition?"

"It's a boy trapped inside the body of a girl."

Penny's husband shifted his head so that his other ear was above the protrusion of her navel. "You may be right," he said at last. "I'm getting a clear S.O.S. here." The baby stirred suddenly and pushed outward. Her husband raised his head. "Look," he said. "Look at this."

While the child pushed, its form could be seen, just faintly. It was as if a new continent had suddenly arisen. Her husband pointed out one peninsula. "It's a foot." He was excited. "Penny, it's a foot, I swear. There's a real baby in there."

Penny reached down and gave the foot a push. She got a kick in response. She pushed on other, less identifiable parts of the form and found something hard. She felt it carefully. "Did I ever tell you the dragon's riddle?" she asked her husband. "I learned it from a witch when I was just a little girl."

"No," her husband answered. "How did you happen to meet a witch?"

"She was my neighbor." Penny stopped and considered her answer. "She was my friend," she added, a little self-consciously.

Her husband reached for her hand, kissing the palm and laying it over his own eyes. He had turned onto his back. "What a brave little girl you must have been, Penny." His voice was sleepy.

Penny lay and looked out the bedroom window. There was a great movement in the sky; half a moon floated in the upper right corner of the window, clouds covering and uncovering it like smoke. Still the same moon, Penny thought. Always the same moon. But, no, now it had footprints on it, large prints like those the Abominable Snowman left in the snow. Right at this second, she wondered, right now were the prints in the dark or in the sunlight? She pulled her hand back and rolled to her side to face her husband. "Yes," she agreed. "Yes, I was." Her husband smiled. "Listen," she continued. "I'm quite serious about this. Are you listening?" She waited until he had opened his eyes and was looking at her. "This witch was born in India where, she told me, she once saw a

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woman burned to death. I was eleven. This was 1955. Now, I looked it up later and sati was abolished by the British in 1829. Let's say, being generous, that in order to remember it she must have been at least four years old. That means when I knew her this witch was somewhat older than a hundred and thirty."

"No," her husband protested. He sat upright, stuffing his pillow behind his neck. "India is a large country. Parts of it were never controlled by the British and lots of it was only nominally controlled. I'm sure there were countless violations. For decades."

"How would a little English girl get to see an illegal procedure? A murder?"

"How would she see it even when it was legal? What kind of a family takes a four-year-old to a funeral pyre? Not a *British* family." Her husband closed his eyes and tilted his chin upwards. "Sorry, Penny. It doesn't make sense. Did she say specifically it was a sati she saw? Maybe it was an accidental death. Or something she saw as an adult. Now it's brides they're burning, isn't it? Dowry murders?"

Penny picked at the white tufted bedspread with her fingers. "You're just like my mother," she complained. "You always have some simple explanation for any astounding occurrence. Thank God I know better."

Her husband crossed his arms behind his head. "I just believe in exhausting the probable before clutching at the impossible. You're pregnant so you get to be irrational. You women have all the fun." Penny reached over and pinched him. "Ouch," he said. He leaned towards her stomach and spoke to the baby. "We could poke back," he told it, "but we're bigger than that. Though if you feel like kicking this might be a good time."

"All right," said Penny. "I have another amazing story for you to explain. An elderly woman lives by herself in a small town. She lives there some fifty years. Neighbors come and go, pretty soon she's been there longer than anybody. She spends a lot of time in her yard. Everyone in town knows her by sight; most of them know her name. But not until she dies does anyone in that town know she was a mother. She has a daughter living in England and, for at least twenty years and probably more, not one word has passed between them."

"How do you know?" her husband asked.

"Letters from overseas are rare and the postman is nosy."

"What about phone calls?"

"No. They'd have to go through the operator."

"Well." Her husband closed his eyes again. "That's a sad story, but I wouldn't call it an amazing one."

"Put your hand on my stomach," Penny suggested, "and say that again." They were both silent a moment. "When does one person have

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two hearts?" Penny asked. "That's the dragon's riddle, or that's my version of it. It's a very feminine riddle."

"What do I get if I can answer it, too?" her husband asked. He kissed her on the forehead, just where a witch would kiss her to protect her. He left his hand lying softly on her hair.

"I don't know, Stephen," she said. "It's a wonderful thing, isn't it?" She took his hand and directed it down over her face to the hollow of her throat, between her breasts and then onto her swollen belly. "Wonderful," she repeated. "But I think maybe you get just a little scared." ●

ELEGY FOR AN ALIEN

The children loved him well, the ancient one
Who crossed black space some eighty years ago
To settle here and call this orange sun
His own. He told us tales of Romeo
And Juliet, Ulysses, Mickey Mouse,
Noah, King Arthur's knights, the Trojan War,
Tarzan and Jane. We gathered at his house
On the long winter nights, teasing for more.

His children's children dug his grave today,
In a thin drizzle under sepia sky,
And now he rests beside the alien corn
The settlers brought across the Milky Way.
He was the final alien to die,
For all the rest of us are native born.

—Hope Athearn

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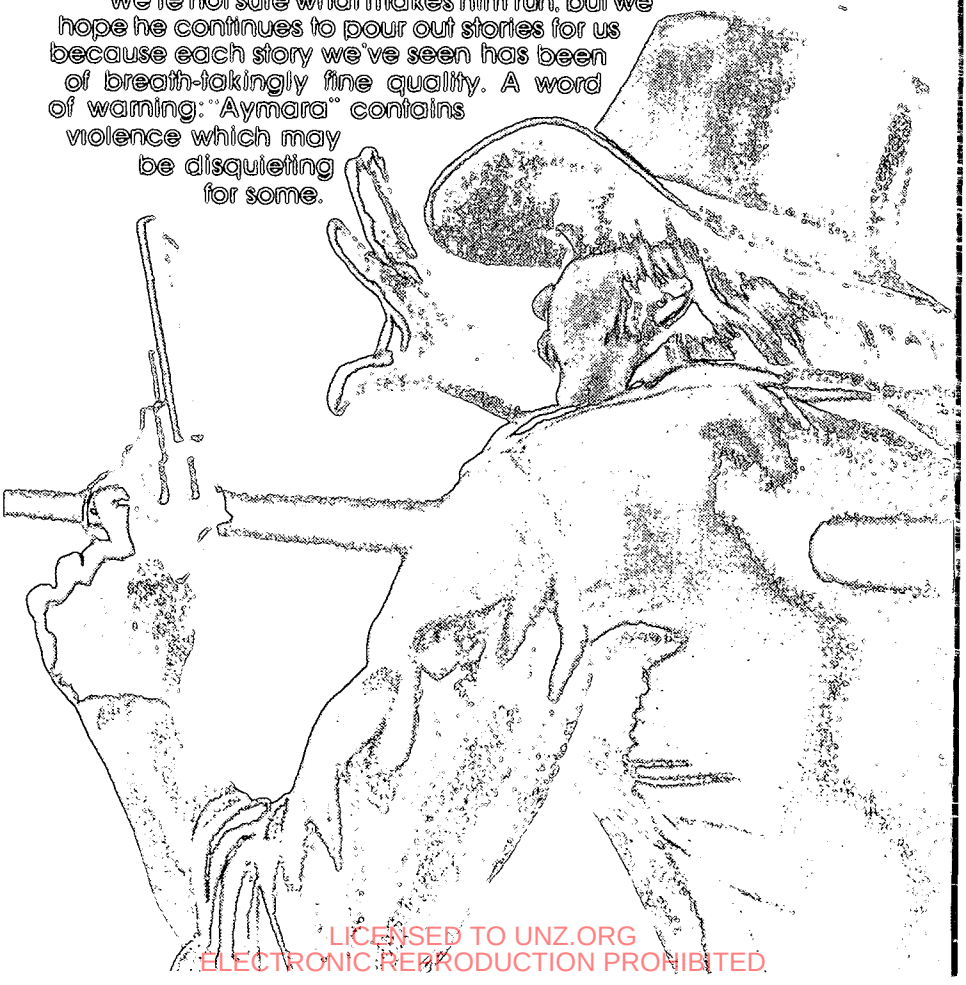
by Lucius Shepard

AYMARA

art: Terry Lee

Here is another deeply moving story by Lucius Shepard. We're not sure what makes him run, but we hope he continues to pour out stories for us because each story we've seen has been of breath-takingly fine quality. A word of warning: "Aymara" contains violence which may be disquieting for some.



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My name is William Page Corson, and I am the black sheep of the Buckingham County Corsons of Virginia. How I came to earn such disrepute relates to several months I spent in Honduras during the spring and summer of 1978, while doing research for a novel to be based on the exploits of an American mercenary who had played a major role in regional politics. That novel was never written, partly because I was of an age (twenty-one) at which one's concentration often proves unequal to lengthy projects, but mainly due to reasons that will be made clear—or if not made clear, then at least brought somewhat into focus—in the following pages.

One day while leafing through an old travel book, *A Honduran Adventure* by William Wells, I ran across the photograph of a blandly handsome young man with blond hair and mustache, carrying a saber and wearing an ostrich plume in his hat. The caption identified him as General Lee Christmas, and the text disclosed that he had been a railroad engineer in Louisiana until 1901, when—after three consecutive days on the job—he had fallen asleep at the wheel and wrecked his train. To avoid prosecution he had fled to Honduras, there securing employment on a fruit company railroad. One year later, soldiers of the revolution led by General Manuel Bonilla had seized his train, and rather than merely surrendering, he had showed his captors how to armor the flatcars with sheet iron; thus protected, the soldiers had gained control of the entire north coast, and for his part in the proceedings, Christmas had been awarded the rank of general.

From other sources I learned that Christmas had taken a fine house in Tegucigalpa after the successful conclusion of the revolution, and had spent most of his time hunting in Olancho, a wilderness region bordering Nicaragua. By all accounts, he had been the prototypical good ol' boy, content with the cushy lot that had befallen him; but in 1904 something must have happened to change his basic attitudes, for it had been then that he entered the employ of the United Fruit Company, becoming in effect the company enforcer. Whenever one country or another would balk at company policy, Christmas would foment a rebellion and set a more malleable government in office; through this process, United Fruit had come to dominate Central American politics, earning the sobriquet El Pulpo (The Octopus) by virtue of its grasping tactics.

These materials fired my imagination and inflamed my leftist sensibility, and I traveled to Honduras in hopes of fleshing out the story. I soon unearthed a wealth of anecdotal detail, much of it testifying to Christmas' irrational courage: he had, for instance, once blown up a building atop which he was standing to prevent the armory it contained from falling into counter-revolutionary hands. But nowhere could I discover what event had precipitated the transformation of an affable, easy-

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going man into a ruthless mercenary, and an understanding of Christmas' motivations was, I believed, of central importance to my book. Six weeks went by, no new knowledge came to light, and I had more or less decided to create a fictive cause for Christmas' transformation, when I heard that some of the men who had fought alongside him in 1902 might still be alive on the island of Guanoja Menor.

From the window of the ancient DC-3 that conveyed me to Guanoja, the island resembled the cover of a travel brochure, with green hills and white beaches fringed by graceful palms; but at ground level it was revealed to be the outpost of an unrelenting poverty. Derelict shacks were tucked into the folds of the hills, animal wastes fouled the beaches, and the harbors were choked with sewage. The capital, Meachem's Landing, consisted of a few dirt streets lined with weatherbeaten shanties set on pilings, and beneath them lay a carpet of coconut litter and broken glass and crab shells. Black men wearing rags glared at me as I hiked in from the airport, and their hostility convinced me that even the act of walking was an insult to the lethargic temper of the place.

I checked into the Hotel Captain Henry—a ramshackle wooden building, painted pink, with a rust-scabbed roof and an electric pole lashed to its second-story balcony—and slept until nightfall. Then I set out to investigate a lead provided by the hotel's owner: he had told me of a man in his nineties, Fred Welcomes, who lived on the road to Flowers Bay and might have knowledge of Christmas. I had not gone more than a half-mile when I came upon a little graveyard confined by a fence of corroded ironwork and overgrown with weeds from which the tops of the tombstones bulged like toadstools. Many of the stones dated from the turn of the century, and realizing that the man I was soon to interview had been a contemporary of these long-dead people, I had a sense of foreboding, of standing on the verge of a supernatural threshold. Dozens of times in the years to follow, I was to have similar apprehensions, a notion that everything I did was governed by unfathomable forces; but never was it stronger than on that night. The wind was driving glowing clouds across the moon, intermittently allowing it to shine through, causing the landscape to pulse dark to bright with the rhythm of a failing circuit, and I could feel ghosts blowing about me, hear windy voices whispering words of warning.

Welcomes' shanty sat amid a banana grove, its orange-lit windows flickering like spirits in a dark water. As I drew near, its rickety shape appeared to assemble the way details are filled in during a dream, acquiring a roof and door and pilings whenever I noticed that it seemed to lack such, until at last it stood complete, looking every bit as dilapidated as I supposed its owner to be. I hesitated before approaching, startled by a banging shutter. Glints of moonlit silver coursed along the

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warp of the tin roof, and the plastic curtains twitched like the eyelids of a sleeping cat. At last I climbed the steps, knocked, and a decrepit voice responded, asking who was there. I introduced myself, explained that I was interested in Lee Christmas, and—after a considerable pause—was invited to enter.

The old man was sitting in a room lit by a kerosene lantern, and on first glance he seemed a giant; even after I had more realistically estimated his height to be about six-five, his massive hands and the great width of his shoulders supported the idea that he was larger than anyone had a right to be. It may be that this impression was due to the fact that I had expected him to be shriveled with age; but though his coal-black skin was seamed and wrinkled, he was still well-muscled: I would have guessed him to be a hale man in his early seventies. He wore a white cotton shirt, gray trousers, and a baseball cap from which the emblem had been ripped. His face was solemn and long-jawed, all its features so prominent that it looked to be a mask carved of black bone; his eyes were clouded over with milky smears, and from his lack of reaction to my movements, I came to realize he was blind.

"Well, boy," he said, apparently having gauged my youth from the timbre of my voice. "What fah you want to know 'bout Lee Christmas? You want to be a warrior?"

I switched on my pocket tape recorder and glanced around. The furniture—two chairs and a table—was rough-hewn; the bed was a pallet with some clothes folded atop it. An outdated calendar hung from the door, and mounted on the wall opposite Welcomes was a small cross of black coral: in the orange flux of the lantern light, it looked like acomplex incision in the boards.

I told him about my book, and when I had done he said, "I 'spect I can help you some. I were wit' Lee from the Battle of La Ceiba 'til the peace at Comayagua, and fah a while after dat."

He began to ramble on in a direction that did not interest me, and I cut in, saying, "I've heard there was no love lost between the islanders and the Spanish. Why did they join Bonilla's revolution?"

"Dat were Lee's doin'," he said. "He promise dat dis Bonilla goin' to give us our freedom, and so he have no trouble raisin' a company. And he tell us that we ain't goin' to have no difficulty wit' de Sponnish, 'cause dey can't shoot straight." He gave an amused grunt. "Nowadays dey better at shootin', lemme tell you. But in de back-time de men of de island were by far de superior marksmen, and Lee figure if he have us wit' him, den he be able to defeat the garrison at La Ceiba. Dat were a tall order. De leader of de garrison, General Carrillo, were a man wit' magic powers. He ride a white mule and carry a golden sword, and it were said no bullet can bring him down. Many of de boys were leery, but

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Lee gather us on the dock and make us a speech. 'Boys,' he say, 'you done break your mothers' hearts, but you no be breakin' mine. We goin' to come down on de Sponnish like buzzards on a sick steer, and when we through, dey goin' to be showin' to de bone.' And by de time he finish, we everyone of us was spittin' fire."

As evidenced by this recall of a speech made seventy-five years before, Welcomes' memory was phenomenal, and the longer he spoke, the more fluent and vital his narrative became. Everything I had learned about Christmas—his age (twenty-seven in 1902), his short stature, his background—all that was knitted into a whole cloth, and I began to see him as he must have been: an ignorant, cocky man whose courage stemmed from a belief that his life had been ruined and so he might as well throw what remained of it away on this joke of a revolution. And yet he had not been without hope of redemption. Like many of his countrymen, he adhered to the notion that through the application of American know-how, the inferior peoples of Central America could be brought forward into a Star-Spangled future and civilized; I believe he nurtured the hope that he could play a part in this process.

When Welcomes reached a stopping point, I took the opportunity to ask if he knew what had motivated Christmas to enter the service of United Fruit. He mulled the question over a second or two and finally answered with a single word: "Aymara."

So, Aymara, it was then I first heard your name.

Perhaps it is passionate experience that colors my memory, but I recall now that the word had the sound of a charm the old man had pronounced, one that caused the wind to gust hard against the shanty, keening in the cracks, fluttering the pages of the calendar on the door as if it, too, were a creature playing with time. But it was only a name, that of a woman whom Christmas and Welcomes had met while on a hunting trip to Olancho in 1904; specifically, a trip to the site of the ruined city of Olancho Viejo, a place founded by the Spanish in 1589 and destroyed by a mysterious explosion not fifty years thereafter. Since that day, Welcomes said, the vegetation there had grown stunted and malformed, and all manner of evil legend had attached to the area, the most notable being that a beautiful woman had been seen walking in the flames that swept over the valley. Though the city had not been rebuilt, this apparition had continued to be sighted by travelers and Indians, always in the vicinity of a cave that had been blasted into the top of one of the surrounding hills by the explosion. Christmas and Welcomes had arrived at this very hilltop during a furious storm and . . . Well, I will let the old man's words (edited for the sake of readability) describe what happened, for it is his story, not mine, that lies at the core of these complex events.

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* * *

That wind can blow, Lord, that wind can blow! Howlin', rippin' branches off the trees, and drivin' slants of gray rain. Seem like it 'bout to blow everything back to the beginnin' and start all over with creation. Me and Lee was leadin' the horses along the rim of the valley, lookin' for shelter and fearin' for our lives, 'cause the footin' treacherous and the drop severe. And then I spot the cave. Not for a second did I think this the cave whereof the legend speak, but when I pass through the entrance, that legend come back to me. The walls, y'see, they smooth as glass, and there were a tremble in the air like you'd get from a machine runnin' close by . . . 'cept there ain't no sound. The horses took to snortin' and balkin', and Lee pressed hisself flat against the wall and pointed his pistol at the dark. His hair were drippin' wet, plastered to his brow, and his eyes was big and starin'. "Fred," he says, "this here ain't no natural place."

"You no have to be tellin' me," I say, and I reckon the shiver in my voice were plain, 'cause he grins and say, "What's the matter, Fred? Ain't you got no sand?" That were Lee's way, you understand—another man's fear always be the tonic for his own.

Just then I spy a light growin' deeper in the cave. A white light, and brighter than any star. Before I could point it out to Lee, that light shooted from the dark and pass right through me with a flash of cold. Then come another light, and another yet. Each one colder and brighter than the one previous, and comin' faster and faster, 'til it 'pears the cave brightly lit and the lights they flickerin' a little. It were so damn cold that the rainwater have froze in my hair, and I were half-blinded on top of that, but I could have swore I seen somethin' inside the light. And when the cold begin to heaten up, the light to dwindle, I made out the shape of a woman . . . just her shape at first, then her particulars. Slim and black-haired, she were. More than pretty, with both Spanish and Indian breedin' showin' in her face. And she wearin' a garment such as I never seen before, but what in later years I come to recognize as a jump-suit. There were blood on her mouth and a fearful expression on her face. The light gathered 'round her in a cloud and dwindle further, fadin' and shrinkin', and right when it 'bout to fade away complete, she take a step toward us and slump to the ground.

For a moment the cave were pitch-dark, with only the wind and the vexed sounds of the horses, but directly I hear a clatter and a spark flares and I see that Lee have got one of the lanterns goin'. He kneel beside the woman and make to touch her, and I tell him, "Man, I wouldn't be doin' that. She some kinda duppy."

"Horseshit!" he say. "Ain't no such thing."

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Like I seen her come a'whirlin' outta nowhere," I say. "That's the

Lee 'pears a man give out with a moan and her eyelids they flutter nothin'. He glance up to ask, but all that come out were this creaky bendin' to her, the muscles in her face start

"It *is* you," she say. "Thank God thinks. ngth and say, "Lee . . . Lee Christmas?"

to him, clawin' at his hand. Lee flinched so w his name and he can't say a'whirlin' off with her into white light. But nothin' And she reach out ed him to go

"Who are you?" Lee asks, and the question seem to amuse her, she laugh, and the laugh turn into a fit of coughin' that bring up more blood to her lips. "Aymara," she say after the fit pass. "My name is Aymara." Her eyes look to go blank for a second or two, and then she clutch at Lee's hand, desperate-like, and say, "You have to listen to me! You have to!"

Lee look a little desperate himself. I can tell he at sea with this whole business. But he say, "Go easy, now. I'll listen." And that calm her some. She lie back, breathin' deep, eyes closed, and Lee's starin' at her, fixated. Suddenly he give himself a shake and say, "We got to get you some doctorin'," and try to lift her. But she fend him off. "Naw," she say. "Can't no doctor help me. I'm dyin'." She open her eyes wide as if she just realize this fact. "Listen," she say. "You know where I come from?" And Lee say, No, but he's been a'wonderin'. "The future," she tell him. "Almost a hundred years from now. And I come all that way to see you, Lee Christmas."

Wellsir, me and Lee exchange looks, and it's clear to me that he thinks whatever happened to this here lady done 'fected her brain.

"You don't believe me!" she say in a panic. "You got to!" And she hold up her wrist and show Lee her watch. "See that? You ain't got watches like that in 1904!" I peer close and see that this watch ain't got no hands, just numbers made up of dots that flicker and change as they toll off the seconds. But it don't convince me of nothin'—I figure it's just some foreign thing. She must can tell we still don't believe her, 'cause she pull out a coupla other items to make her case. I know what them items was now—a ball point pen and a calculator—but at the time they was new to me. I still ain't convinced. Her bein' from the future were a hard truth to swallow, no matter the manner of her arrival in the cave. She start gettin' desperate again, beggin' Lee to believe her, and then her features they firm up and she say, "If I ain't from the future, then how come I know you been talkin' to United Fruit 'bout doin' some soldierin' for 'em."

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This were the first I hear 'bout Lee and Un[illegible]ames surprised, 'cause Lee didn't have no use for [illegible]xpression on you know that?" he asks, and she say, "[illegible] she mention Jacob books. And that ain't all I know." Sh[illegible] then she reel off another list, that weren't familiar to me, but [illegible]d Guy Maloney, who were Lee's face—must have meant [illegible]n she finish, she clutch his hand again. Wettstein and Andrew C[illegible]. If you don't, the world gonna suffer for to become Lee's second, Lee. If you don't, the world gonna suffer for this one of battles.

"You gotta '[illegible]

it."

[illegible]tell Lee have found reason to believe from what she said, but that the idea of workin' with United Fruit didn't set well with him. "Couldn't nothin' good come of that," he say. "Them boys at the fruit company ain't got much in mind but fillin' their pockets."

"It's true," she say. "The company they villains, but sometimes you gotta do the wrong thing for to 'chieve the right result. And that's what *you* gotta do. 'Less you help 'em, 'less America takes charge down here, the world's gonna wind up in a war that might just be the end of it."

I know this strike a chord in Lee, what with him always carryin' on 'bout good ol' American ingenuity bein' the salvation of the world. But he don't say nothin'.

"You gotta trust me," she say. "Everything depends 'pon you trustin' me and doin' what I say. I come all this way, knowin' I were bound to die of it, just to tell you this, to make sure you'd do what's necessary. You think I'd do that to tell you a lie?"

"Naw," he says. "I s'pose not." But I can see he still havin' his doubts.

She sigh and look worried and then she start explainin' to us that the machine what brought her have gone haywire and set her swayin' back and forth through time like a pendulum. Back to the days of the Conquistador and into the future an equal ways. She tell us 'bout watchin' the valley explode and the old city crumblin' and finally she say, "I only have a glimpse of the future, of what's ahead of my time, and I won't lie, it were too quick for me to have much sense of it. But I have a feelin' from it, a feelin' of peace and beauty . . . like a perfume the world's givin' off. When I 'cepted this duty, I thought it were just to make sure things wouldn't work out worse than they has, but now I know somethin' glorious is goin' to come, somethin' you never would 'spect to come of all the bloodshed and terror of history."

It were the 'spression on her face at that moment—like she's still havin' that feelin' of peace—that's what put my doubts to rest. It weren't nothin' she coulda faked. Lee he seemed moved by it, but maybe he's stuck with

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thinkin' that she's addled, 'cause he say, "If you from the future, you tell me some more 'bout my life."

A shudder pass through her, and for a second I think we gonna lose her then and there. But she gather herself and say, "You gonna marry a woman named Anna and have two daughters, one by her and one by another woman."

Not many knew Lee were in love with Anna Towers, the daughter of an indigo grower in Truxillo, and even less knew 'bout his illegitimate daughter. Far as I concerned, this sealed the matter, but Aymara didn't understand the weight of what she'd said and kept goin'.

"You gonna die of a fever in Puerto Cortez," she says, "in the year . . ."

"No!" Lee held up his hand. "I don't wanna hear that."

"Then you believe me."

"Yes," he say. "I do."

For a while there weren't no sound 'cept the keenin' of the wind from the cave mouth. Lee were downcast, studyin' the backs of his hands like he were readin' there some sorry truth, and Aymara were glum herself, like she were sad he did believe her. "Will you do it?" she asks.

Lee give a shrug. "Do I got a choice?

"Maybe not," she tell him. "Maybe this how it have to be. One of the men who . . . who help send me here, he claim the course of time can't be changed. But I couldn't take the chance he were wrong." She wince and swallow hard. "Will you do it?"

"Hell," he say after mullin' it over. "Guess I ain't got no better thing to do. Might as well go soldierin' awhile."

She search his face to see if he lyin' . . . 'least that's how it look to me. "Swear to it," she say, takin' his hand. "Swear you'll do it."

"All right," he say. "I swear. Now you rest easy."

He try doctorin' her some, wettin' down her brow and such, but nothin' come of it. Somethin' 'bout the manner of travel, she say, have tore up her insides, and there's no fixin' 'em. It 'pear to me she just been hangin' on to drag that vow outta Lee, and now he done it, she let go and start slippin' away. Once she make a rally, and she tell us more' 'bout her journey, sayin' the strange feelin's that sweep over her come close to drivin' her mad. I think Lee's doubtin' her again, 'cause he ask another question or two 'bout the future. But it seem she answer to his satisfaction. Toward the end she take to talkin' crazy to someone who ain't there, callin' him Darlin' and sayin' how she sorry. Then she grab hold of Lee and beg him not to go back on his word.

"I won't," he say. But I think she never hear him, 'cause as he speak blood come gushin' from her mouth and she sag and look to be gazin' into nowhere.

Lee don't hardly say nothin' for a long time, and then it's only after

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the storm have passed and he concerned with makin' a grave. We put her down near the verge of the old city, and once she under the earth, Lee ask me to say a little somethin' over her. So I utter up a prayer. It were strange tryin' to talk to God with the ruined tower of the cathedral loomin' above, all ivied and crumblin', like a sign that no prayers would be answered.

"What you gonna do?" I ask Lee as he saddlin' up.

He shake his head and tighten the cinch. "What would you do, Fred?"

"I guess I wouldn't want to be messin' with them fruit company boys," I say. "They takes things more serious than I likes."

"Ain't that the truth," he say. He look over to me, and it seem all the hollows in his face has deepened. "But maybe I ain't been takin' things serious enough." He worry his lip. "You really think she from the future?" He ask this like he wantin' to have me say, No.

"I think she from somewhere damn strange," I say. "The future sound 'bout as good as anything."

He scuff the ground with his heel. "Pretty woman," he say. "I guess it ain't reasonable she just throw her life away for nothin'."

I reckoned he were right.

"Jesus Christ!" He smack his saddle. "I wish I could just forget alla 'bout her."

"Well, maybe you can," I tell him. "A man can forget 'bout most anything with enough time."

I never should have say that, 'cause it provide Lee with somethin' to act contrary to, with a reason to show off his pride, and it could be that little thing I say have tipped the scales of his judgment.

"Maybe *you* can forget it," he say testily. "But not me. I ain't 'bout to forget I give her my word." He swing hisself up into the saddle and set his horse prancin' with a jerk of the reins. Then he grin. "Goddamn it, Fred! Let's go! If we gotta win the world for ol' United Fruit, we better get us a move on!"

And with that, we ride up from the valley and into the wild and away from Aymara's grave, and far as I know, Lee never did take a backward glance from that day forth, so busy he were with his work of forgin' the future.

I asked questions, attempting to clarify certain points, the exact date of the encounter among other things, but of course I did not believe Welcomes. Despite his aura of folksy integrity, I knew that Guanoja was rife with storytellers, men who would stretch the truth to any dimension for a price, and I assumed Welcomes to be one of these. Yet I was intrigued by what I perceived as the pathos surrounding the story's invention. Here was the citizen of a country long oppressed by the economic policies

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of the United States, who—in order to earn a tip from an American tourist (I had given him twenty *lempira* upon the conclusion of his tale)—had created a fable that exonerated the United States from guilt and laid the blame for much of Central America's brutal history upon the shoulders of a mystical woman from the future. On returning to my hotel, I typed up sections of the story and seeded them throughout a longer piece that documented various of Christmas' crimes along with others committed by his successors. I entitled the piece "Aymara," and the following day I sent it off to *Mother Jones*, having no real expectations that it would see print.

But "Aymara" *was* published, as was my next piece, and the next . . . And so began a journalistic career that has lasted these sixteen years.

During those years, my espousal of left-wing causes amd the ensuing notoriety inspired my family to break off all connections with me. (They preferred not to acknowledge that I also lent my support to populist rebellions against Soviet-sponsored regimes.) I was not offended by their action; in fact, I took it for a confirmation of the rightness of my course, since—with their stock portfolios and mausoleum-like homes and born-again conservatism—they were as nasty a pack of capitalist rats as one could meet. I traveled to Argentina, South Africa, The Phillipines, to any country that offered the scenario of a superpower-backed dictatorship and masses of the oppressed, and I wired back stories that sought to undermine the Commie-hating mentality engendered by the Reagan years. I admit that my zeal was occasionally misplaced, that I was used at times by corrupt men who passed-themselves off as populist leaders. And I will further admit that in some cases I was motivated less by passionate concern than by a desire to increase my own legend. I had, you see, become a media figure. My photograph was featured on the covers of national magazines concomitant with such headings as "William Corson and the New Journalism"; my books made the best-seller lists; talk shows pestered my agent. But despite the glitter, I truly cared about the causes I espoused. Perhaps I cared too much. Perhaps—like Lee Christmas—I made the mistaken assumption that my American citizenship was a guarantee of wisdom superior to that of the peoples whom I tried to help. In retrospect, I can see that the impulses that provoked my writing of "Aymara" were no less ingenuous, no more informed, than those that inspired his career; but this is an irony I do not choose to dwell upon.

In January of 1994, I returned to Guanoja. The purpose of the trip was partly for a vacation, my first in many years, and also to satisfy a nostalgic whim to visit the place where my career had begun. The years had brought little change to Meachem's Landing. True, there was now a jetport outside of town, and a few of the shanty bars had been replaced

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by more pricey watering holes of concrete block; but it remained essentially the same confluence of dirt streets lined with weathered shacks and populated by raggedly dressed blacks. The most salient differences were the gaggle of lower-echelon Honduran civil servants who spent each day hunched over their typewriters on the second-story verandah of the Hotel Captain Henry, churning out reams of officialese, and the alarming number of CIA agents: cold-eyed, patently anonymous men who could be seen sitting in the bars, gazing moodily toward Nicaragua and the Red Menace. War was in the offing, its onset as inevitable as the approach of a season, and this, too, was a factor in my choice of a vacation spot. I had received word of a mysterious military installation on the Honduran mainland, and—after having nosed around Washington for several weeks—I had been invited to inspect this installation. The Pentagon apparently wanted to assure me of its harmlessness and thus prevent their benign policies from being besmirched by more of my yellow journalism.

After checking into the hotel, I walked out past the town to the weedy little graveyard, where I expected I would find a stone marking the remains of Fred Welcomes. There was, indeed, such a stone, and I was startled to learn that he had survived until 1990, dying at the age of 106. I had assumed that he could not have lived much past the date of my interview with him, and the fact that he had roused my guilt. All my good fortune was founded upon his eloquent lie, and I could have done a great deal to ease his decline. I leaned against the rusted fence, thinking that I was no better than the businessmen whose exploitative practices I had long decried, that I had mined gold from the old man's imagination and given him a pittance in return. I was made so morose that later the same night, unable to achieve peace of mind, I set out on a drunk . . . at least this was my intent.

Across the street from the hotel was a two-story building of white stucco with faded lettering above the door that read Maud Price's Golden Dream. I remembered Maud from my previous trip—a fat, black woman who had kept an enormous turtle in a tin washtub and would entertain herself by feeding it chicken necks and watching it eat—and I was saddened to discover that she, too, had passed away. Her daughter was now the proprietor, and I was pleased to find that she had maintained Maud's inimitable decor. Strung across the ceiling were dozens upon dozens of man-shaped paper dolls, colored red and black, and these cast magical-looking shadows on the walls by the light of two flickering lanterns. Six wooden tables, a bar atop which rested a venerable stereo that was grinding out listless reggae, and a number of framed photographs whose glass was too flyspecked to permit easy observation of the subject matter. I ordered a beer, a Salvavida, and was preparing for a bout of drunken

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self-abnegation, when I noticed a young woman staring at me from the rear table. On meeting my eyes, she showed no sign of embarrassment and held her gaze steady for a long moment before turning back to the magazine she had been reading. Even in that dim light, I could see she was beautiful. Slim, long-limbed, with a honeyed complexion. Curls of black hair hung over the front of her white blouse, their shapes as elegant as the tailfeathers of exotic birds. Her face . . . I could tell you that she had large dark eyes and high cheekbones, that her features had an impassive Indian cast. But that does nothing more than to define her by type and illuminates her not at all. This was a woman with whom I was soon to be in love, if I was not somewhat in love with her already, and the most difficult thing in the world to describe is the face of your lover, because though it is familiar in every detail, it tends to become a mirror of your devotion, to reflect the ideals of passion, and thus is less a human face than the face of love itself.

I continued to watch her, and after a while she looked up again and smiled. There was no way I could ignore this contact. I walked over, introduced myself (in Spanish, which I assumed to be her native tongue), and asked if I could join her. "Why not?" she replied in English, and after I had taken a seat, she pushed her magazine toward me, pointing to an inset photograph of me, one snapped some years before when I had worn a mustache. "I thought it was you," she said, "You look much more handsome clean-shaven."

Her name, she told me, was Ivie Solis. She was employed by a travel agency in La Ceiba and was on a working vacation, having arrived the day before. We talked of this and that, nothing of consequence, but the air between us seemed to crackle. Everything about her, everything she did, struck a chord within me, and I was mesmerized by her movements, entranced, as if she were a magician who might at any moment loose a flight of birds from her fingertips.

Eventually the conversation turned to my work, of which she had read the lion's share, and she told me that her favorite piece was my first, "Aymara." I expressed surprise that she had seen it—it had never been reprinted—and she explained that her parents had run a small hotel catering to American tourists, and the magazine had been left in one of the rooms. "It had the feel of being part of a puzzle," she said. "Or the answer to a riddle."

"It seems fairly straightforward to me," I said.

She tucked a curl behind her ear, a gesture I was coming to recognize as characteristic. "That's because you didn't believe the old man's story."

"And you did?"

"I didn't leap to disbelief as you did." She settled back in her chair,

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picking at the label of her beer bottle. "I guess I just like thinking about what motivated the woman."

"Obviously," I said, "according to the logic of the story, she came from a world worse off than this one and was hoping to initiate a course of events that would improve it."

"I thought that myself at first," she said. "But it *doesn't* fit the logic of the story. Don't you remember? She knew what would happen to Christmas. His military career, his triumphs. If she'd come from a world in which those things hadn't occurred, she wouldn't have had knowledge of them."

"So . . ." I began.

"I think," she cut in, "that if she did exist, she came from this world. That she knew she would have to sacrifice herself in order to ensure that Christmas did as he did. It may be that your article was the agency that informed her of her duty."

"Even if that's the case," I said, "why would she have tried to inspire Christmas' crimes? Why wouldn't she have tried to make him effect good works? Perhaps she could have destroyed United Fruit."

"That would be the last thing she'd want. Don't you see? If her actions were politically motivated, she would understand that before real change could occur, the circumstances, the conditions of life under American rule, would have to be so oppressive that violent change would become a viable option. Revolution. She'd realize that Christmas' violences were necessary. They set the tone for American policies and licensed subsequent violence. She'd be afraid that if Christmas didn't work for United Fruit, the process of history that set the stage for revolution might be slowed down or negated. Perhaps the American stranglehold might be achieved with such subtlety that change would be forever impossible."

She spoke these words with marked intensity, and I believe I realized then that there was more to Ivie than met the eye. Her logic was the logic of terrorism, the justification of bloodshed in terms of its consciousness-raising effects. But I was so intent upon her as a woman, I scarcely noticed the implication of what she had said.

"Well," I said, "given that your scenario is accurate, it still doesn't make sense. The idea of time travel, of tinkering with the past . . . it's absurd. Too many paradoxes are involved. What you're supposing isn't a chain of events wherein one action predicates another. It's a loop, a metaphysical knot tied in reality, linking my article and some woman and a man years dead. There's no end, no beginning. Things don't work that way."

"They don't?" She lowered her eyes and traced a design in the moisture on the table. "It seems to me that life *is* paradox. Things occur without apparent reason between nations." She looked up at me. "Between people.

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Perhaps there are reasons, but they're impossible to unravel or define. And dealing with such an unreasonable quantity as time, I wouldn't expect it to be anything other than paradoxical."

We moved on to other topics, and shortly afterward we left the bar and walked along the road to Flowers Bay. A few hundred yards past the last shanty, at a point where the road meandered close to the shore and the sea lay calm beneath a sheen of starlight, visible through a labyrinthine fringe of mangrove, there I kissed her. It was the kind of kiss that holds a lifetime of promise, tentative, then growing more assured and involving as the contact surpasses all your expectations. I had thought kisses like that existed solely in the province of romance novels, and on discovering this was not so, all my cynicism was dissolved and I fell wholly in love with Ivie Solis.

I do not propose to detail our affair, the evolution of our feelings. While these things seemed to me remarkable, I doubt they were more so than the interactions of any other pair of lovers, and they are pertinent to my story only in the volatility that attached to our moments together. Despite Ivie's thesis that love—like time—was an inexplicable mystery, I sought to explain it to myself and decided that because I had never had any slack in my life, because I had never allowed myself the luxury of deep emotional involvement, I had therefore been ripe for the picking. I might, I told myself, have fallen in love with anyone. Ivie had simply been the first acceptable candidate to happen along. All I knew of her aside from her work and place of birth were a few bits and pieces: that she was twenty-seven; that she had attended the University of Miami; that—like most Hondurans—she resented the American presence in her country; that she had a passion for coconut candy and enjoyed the works of Manuel Puig. How, I wondered, could I be obsessed with someone about whose background I was almost completely ignorant. And yet perhaps my depth of feeling was enhanced by this lack of real knowledge. Things are often most alluring when they are not quite real, when your contact with them is brief and intense, and in the light of the mind they acquire the vividity and artfulness of a dream.

We spent nearly every moment of every day in each other's company, and most of this in making love. My room, our clothing, smelled of sex, and we became such a joke to the old woman who cleaned the hotel that whenever she saw us she would let loose with gales of laughter. The only times we were apart were an hour or so each afternoon when Ivie would have to perform her function as a travel agent, securing—she said—cheap group rates from various resorts that would be offered by her firm to American skin-divers. On most of these occasions I would pace back and forth, impatient for her return. But then, ten days after we had initiated the affair, thinking I might as well make some use of the interval, I

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rented a car and drove to Spanish Harbor, a small town up the coast where there had lately been several outbreaks of racial violence, highly untypical for Guanoja; I was interested in determining whether or not these incidents were related to the martial atmosphere that had been gathering about the island.

By the time I arrived in the town, which differed from Meachem's Landing hardly at all, having a larger harbor and perhaps a half a dozen more streets, I was thirsty, and I stopped in a tourist restaurant for a beer. This particular restaurant, The Treasure Chest, consisted of a small room done up in pirate decor that was fronted by a cement deck where patrons sat beneath striped umbrellas. Standing at the bar, I had a clear view of the deck, and as I sipped my beer, wondering how best to pursue my subject, I spotted Ivie sitting at a table near the railing. With her was a man wearing a gray business suit. I assumed him to be a resort owner, but when he turned to signal a waiter, I recognized him by his hawkish features and fringe of salt-and-pepper beard to be Abimael Sotomayor, the leader of *Sangre y Verdad* (Blood and Truth), one of the most extreme of Latin American terrorist groups. I had twice interviewed him and I knew him for a charismatic and scary man, a poet who excelled at torture, whose followers performed quasi-mystical blood rituals in his name prior to each engagement. The sight of him with Ivie numbed me, and I began to construct rationalizations that would explain her presence in innocent terms. But none of my rationalizations held water.

I left the restaurant and drove full-tilt back to Meachem's Landing, where I bribed the cleaning woman into admitting me to Ivie's room. It was identical to mine, with gray boards and a metal cot and a night table covered in plastic and a single window that opened onto the second-story verandah. I began by searching the closet, but found only shoes and clothing, apparel quite in keeping with her purported job. Her overnight case contained make-up, and the rest of her luggage was empty . . . or so it appeared. But as I hefted one of the suitcases, preparing to stow it beneath the cot, I realized it was heavier than it should have been. I laid it on the cot and before long I located the catch that opened a false bottom; inside was a machine pistol.

I sat staring at the gun. It was an emblem of Ivie's complicity with an organization so violent that even I, who sympathized with their cause, was repelled by their actions. Yet despite this, I found I loved her no less; I only feared that she did not love me, that she was using me. And, too, I feared for her: the fact that she was at the least an associate of *Sangre y Verdad* offered little hope of a happy ending for the two of us. Finally I replaced the false bottom, restored the suitcase to its original spot beneath the cot and went to my room to wait for Ivie.

That night I said nothing about the gun, rather I tested Ivie in a

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variety of ways, trying to learn whether or not her affections for me were fraudulent. Not only did she pass every test, but I came to understand much about her that had been puzzling me. I realized that her distracted silences, her deferential attitude concerning the future, her vague references to "responsibilities," all these were symptomatic of the difficulty our relationship was causing her, the contrary pulls exerted by her two passions. Throughout the night, I kept thinking of horror stories I had heard about *Sangre y Verdad*, but I loved Ivie too much to judge her. How could I—a citizen of the country which had created the conditions that bred organizations like Sotomayor's—ever hope to fathom the pressures that had brought her to this pass?

For the next three days, knowing that our time together was likely to be brief, I tried to put politics from mind. Those days were nearly perfect. We swam, we danced, we rented a dory and rowed out past the reef and threw out lines and caught silkfish, satinfish, fish that gleamed iridescent red and blue and yellow, like talismans of our own brilliance. Yet despite our playfulness, our happiness, I was constantly aware that the end could not be far off.

Four days after her meeting with Sotomayor, Ivie told me she had an appointment that evening, one that might last two or three hours; her nervous manner informed me that something important was in the works. At eight o'clock she drove off along the road to Flowers Bay, and I tailed her in my rented car, maintaining a discreet distance, my headlights dark. She parked by the side of the road about a mile past Welcomes' shanty, and seeing this, I pulled my car into a thicket and continued on foot.

It was a moonless night, but the stars were thick, their light revealing every shadowy rut, silhouetting the palms and mangrove. Mosquitoes whined in my ear; the sound of waves on the reef came as a faint hiss. A couple of hundred feet beyond Ivie's car stood a largish shanty set among a stand of cocals. Several cars were parked out front, and two men were lounging by the door, obviously on sentry duty. Orange light flickered in the window. I eased through the brush, making my way toward the rear of the shanty, and after ascertaining that no guards were posted there, I duckwalked across a patch of open ground and flattened against the wall. I could hear many voices speaking at once, none of them intelligible. I inched along the wall to the window whose shutter was cracked open. Through the gap I spotted Sotomayor sitting atop a table, and beside him, a thin, agitated-looking man of thirty-five or so, with prematurely gray hair. I could see none of the others, but judging by their voices, I guessed there to be at least a dozen men and women present.

With a peremptory gesture, Sotomayor signaled for quiet. "I would

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much have preferred to use my organization alone," he said. "But Doctor Dobler"—he acknowledged the gray-haired man with a nod—"insisted that the entire spectrum of the left be included and I had no choice but to agree. However, in the interests of security, I wish to limit participation in this operation to those in this room. And, since some of you are unknown to the rest, I suggest that we not increase our intimacy by an exchange of names. Let us choose false names. Simple ones, if you please." He smoothed back his hair, glancing around at his audience. "As I am to lead, I will take a military rank for my name." He smiled. "And as I am not overly ambitious, you may refer to me as the Sergeant." Laughter. "Perhaps if we are successful, I will receive a promotion."

Each of the men and women—there were fourteen in all—selected a name, and I heard Ivie say, "Aymara."

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled to hear it, but knowing her fascination with my article, I did not think it an unexpected choice.

"Very well," said Sotomayor, all business now. "The matter under consideration is the American military project known as Longshot."

I was startled—Longshot was the code name of the installation I was soon to inspect.

"For some months," Sotomayor went on, "we have been hearing rumors concerning Longshot, none likely to inspire confidence in our neighbors to the north. We have been unable to substantiate the rumors, but this situation has changed. Doctor Dobler was until recently one of the coordinators of the project. He has come to us at great personal risk, because he believes there is terrible danger associated with Longshot, and because, with our lack of bureaucratic impediments, he believes we may be the only ones capable of acting swiftly enough to forestall disaster. I will let him explain the rest."

Sotomayor stepped out of view, leaving the floor to Dobler, who looked terrified. Thinking what it must have taken for him to venture forth from his ivory tower and out among the bad dogs, I awarded him high marks for guts. He cleared his throat. "Project Longshot is essentially an experiment in temporal displacement . . . that is to say, time travel."

This sparked a babble, and Sotomayor called for quiet. I wished I could have seen Ivie's face, wanting to know if she were as stunned and frightened as I was.

"The initial test is to be conducted twenty-three days from now," said Dobler. "We have every reason to believe it will succeed, because evidence exists in the past . . ." He broke off, appearing confused. "There's so much to . . ." His eyes darted left to right. "I'm sorry. I . . ."

"Please be calm," advised Sotomayor. "You're among friends."

Dobler squared his shoulders. "I'm all right," he said, and drew a deep breath. "The site of the project is a hill overlooking the ruins of Olancho

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Viejo, a colonial city destroyed in 1623 by an explosion. I say 'explosion,' but I believe I can safely state that it was not an explosion in the typical sense of the word. For one thing, eyewitness accounts testify that while, indeed, some of the buildings were blown apart, others appeared to crumble, to collapse into powder and chunks of rotten stone, the result of being washed over by a wave of blinding white radiance. Of course these accounts were written by superstitious men—mainly priests—and are thus suspect. Some tell of a beautiful woman walking in the midst of the light, but I think we can attribute that to the Catholic propensity for seeing the Virgin in moments of stress." This elicited a few chuckles, and Dobler was braced by the response. "However, allied with readings we have taken, with other anomalies we've discovered on and near the site, it's evident that the destruction of Olancho Viejo was a direct result of our experiment. Though our target date is in the 1920s, it seems that the displacement will create a kind of shockwave that will produce dire effects three-hundred-and-sixty years in the past."

"How does that affect us?" someone asked.

"I'll get to that in a minute," said Dobler. He was warming to his task, becoming the model of an enthused lecturer. "First it's important you understand that although the initial experiment will merely consist of the displacement of a few laboratory animals and some mineral specimens, plant life, and so forth; the target purpose of the project is the manipulation of the past through assassination and other means."

Expressions of outrage from the gathering.

"Wait!" said Dobler. "That's not what you should be worried about, because I don't think it's possible."

"Why not?" A woman's voice.

"I really don't think I could explain it to you," said Dobler. "The mathematics are too complex . . . and my conclusions, I admit, are arguable. Several of my colleagues are in complete disagreement; they believe the past *can* be altered. But I'm convinced otherwise. Time, according to my mathematical model, has a fixed shape. It is not simply a process that affects physical objects; it has its own physicality, or—better said—the process of time involves its own spectrum of physical events, all on the particulate level, and it is the isolation of this spectrum that will allow us to displace objects into the past." He must have been the focus of bewildered stares, for he threw up his hands in helplessness. "The language isn't capable of conveying an accurate explanation. Suffice it to say, that in my opinion, any attempt to alter the course of history will fail, because the physical potentials of time will compensate for that alteration."

"It sounds to me," said Sotomayor, "as if you're embracing the doctrine of predestination."

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"That's a rather murky analogue," said Dobler. "But, yes, I suppose I am."

"Then why are you asking us to stop something which, according to you, cannot be stopped? If evidence exists that the experiment was carried out, we can do nothing . . . at least if we are to accept your logic."

"As I stated, I may be wrong in this," said Dobler. "In which case, an attack on the project might succeed. But even if time does prove to be unalterable, what is unalterable in this circumstance is the destruction of Olancho Viejo. It's possible that our experiment can be stopped, and the malleability of time will enlist some other causal agent."

"There's something I don't understand." Ivie's voice. "If you are correct about the unalterability of time, what do we have to fear?"

"For every action," said Dobler, "there must be a reaction. The action will be the experiment. One small part of the reaction can be observed in what happened three centuries ago. But my figures show that the greater part of the reaction will occur in the present. I've gone over and over the equations, and there's no error." Dobler paused, summoning thought. "I've no idea what form this end of the reaction will take. It may be similar to the explosion in 1623; it may be entirely different. We know nothing about the forces involved . . . except how to trigger them and how to perform a few simple tricks. But I'm sure of one thing. The reaction will affect matter on the subatomic levels and it will be on the order of a billion times more extensive than what happened in 1623. I doubt anything will survive it."

A silence ensued, broken at last by Sotomayor. "Have you shown these equations to your colleagues?"

"Of course." Dobler gave a despairing laugh. "They believe they've solved the problem by constructing a containment chamber. It's a solution comparable to wrapping a blanket around a nuclear device."

"How can we discount their opinion?" someone asked.

"Look," said Dobler, peeved. "Unless you can understand the mathematics involved, there's no way I can prove my case. I believe my colleagues are too excited about the project to accept the fact that it's potentially disastrous. But what does it mean for me to tell you that? The best evidence I can give you is the fact that I am here, that I have in effect thrown away my career in order to warn you." He looked down at the floor. "Though perhaps I can offer one further proof."

They began to bombard him with questions, most of them challenging in tone, and—concerned that the meeting might suddenly break up and my car be discovered—I slipped away from the window and headed back toward town.

It is a measure, I believe, of the foolishness of love that I was less

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worried about the fate of the world than about Ivie's possible involvement in the events of Welcomes' story, a story I was now hard put to disbelieve; it seemed I was operating under the assumption that if Ivie and I could work things out, everything else would fall into place around us. I drove back to the hotel, waited a while, and then, deciding that I wanted to talk to her somewhere more private, somewhere an argument—I thought one likely—would not be overheard, I left a note asking her to meet me on the far side of the island, at an abandoned construction site a short ways up the beach from St. Mark's Key—the skeleton of a large house belonging to the estate of an American who had died shortly after work had begun. This site was of special moment for Ivie and me. It was set back from the shore, hidden from prying eyes by dense growths of palms and sea grape and cashew trees, and we had made love there on several occasions. By the time I reached it, the moon had risen and the unfinished house—with its gapped walls and skewed beams and free-standing doorways—had the look of a surreal maze of silver light and shadow. Sitting inside it on the ground floor, I felt it was an apt metaphor for the labyrinthine complexity of the situation.

Until that moment, I had not brought my concentration to bear on this complexity, and now, trying to unravel the problem, I found I could not do so. The circumstances of Welcomes' story, of Dobler's, Ivie's, and my own . . . all this smacked of magical serendipity and was proof against logic. Time, which had always been for me a commodity, something to be saved and expended, seemed to have been revealed as a vast fabulous presence cloaked in mystery and capable of miracles, and I had as little hope of comprehending its processes as I would those of a star winking overhead. Less, actually. I attempted to narrow my focus, to consider separate pieces of the puzzle, beginning with what Welcomes had told me. Assuming it was true, I saw how it explained much I had not previously given thought to. Christmas' courage, for instance. Knowing that he would die of a fever would have made him immune to fear in battle. All the pieces fit together with the same irrational perfection. It was only the whole, the image they comprised, that was inexplicable.

At last I gave it up and sat staring at the white combers piling in over the reef, listening to the scattery hiss of lizards running in the beach grass, watching the colored lights of the resort on St. Mark's Key flicker as palm fronds were blown across them by the salt breeze. I must have sat this way an hour before I heard a car engine; a minute later, Aymara—so I had been thinking of her—walked through the frame of the front door and sat beside me. "Let's not stay here," she said, and kissed me on the cheek. "I'd like a drink." In the moonlight her face looked to have been carved more finely, and her eyes were aswim with silvery reflections.

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I could not think how to begin. Finally, settling on directness, I said, "Did you know what Dobler was going to tell you? Is that why you chose the name Aymara?"

She pulled back from me, consternation written on her features. "How . . ." she said; and then: "You followed me. You shouldn't have done that."

"Why the hell not?" Anger over her betrayal, her subterfuge, suddenly took precedence over my concern for her. "How else am I going to keep track of who's who in the revolution these days?"

"You could have been killed," she said flatly.

"Right!" I said, refusing to let her lack of emotionality subdue me. "God knows, Sotomayor might have had you drink my blood for a nightcap! What the hell possessed you to get involved with him?"

"I'm not involved with him!" she said, her own temper surfacing.

"You're not with *Sangre y Verdad?*"

"No, the FDLM."

I was relieved—the FDLM was the most populist and thus the most legitimate element of the Honduran left. "You haven't answered my first question," I said. "Why did you choose that name?"

"I was thinking of you. That's all it was. But now . . . .I don't know."

"You're going to do it, aren't you? Play out the story?" I slugged my thigh in frustration. "Jesus Christ! Sotomayor will kill you if he finds out! And Dobler, he might be a crazy! A CIA plant! Right now he's . . ."

"You didn't stay until the end?" she cut in.

"No."

"He's dead," she said. "He told us that if we attacked, we should destroy all the computers and records, anyone who had knowledge of the process. He said that when he was younger, he would have supported any evil whose goal was the increase of knowledge, but now he had uncovered knowledge that he couldn't control and he couldn't live with that. He said he hoped what he intended to do would prove something to us. Then he went onto the porch and shot himself."

I sat stunned, picturing that nervous little man and his moment of truth.

"I believe him," she said. "Everyone did. I doubt we would have otherwise."

"Sotomayor would have believed him no matter what," I said. "He yearns for disaster. He'd find the end of the world an erotic experience."

"I shouldn't have to explain to you what produces men like Abimael," she said stiffly. She reached behind her to—I assumed—adjust the waistband of her skirt. "Are you going to inform on us?"

Her voice was tremulous, her expression strained, and she continued holding her hand behind her back; it was an awkward posture, and I

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began to suspect her reasons for maintaining it. "What have you got there?" I asked, knowing the answer.

A car passed on the beach, its headlights throwing tattered leaf shadows over the beams.

"What if I said I *was* going to inform on you?"

She lowered her eyes, sighed and brought forth a small caliber automatic; after a second, she let it fall to the floor. She studied it despondently, as if it were a failed something for which she had entertained high hopes. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm . . ." She put her hand to her brow, covering her eyes.

The gun showed a negative black against the planking, an ugly brand marring the smooth grain. I picked it up. Its cold weight fueled my anger, and I heaved it into the shadows.

"I love you." She trailed her fingers across my arm, but I refused to speak or turn to her. "Please, believe me! It's just I don't know what to do anymore." Her voice broke, and it seemed I could smell her tears.

"It's all right." My voice was harsh, burred with anger.

We sat in silence. The crunch of waves on the reef built louder, the wind seethed in the palm crowns, and faint music from the resort added a fractured tinkling—I felt that the things of nature were losing definition, blending into a dissolute melodic rush. Finally I asked her what she intended to do, and she said, "I doubt my intentions matter. I don't think I can avoid going back."

"To 1902? Is that what you mean?" I said this helplessly, sensing the gravity of events sweeping toward us like a huge dark fist. "How can you even consider it? You heard Dobler, you know the dangers."

"I don't believe it's dangerous. Only inevitable."

I turned to her then, ready with protests, arguments. Christ, she was beautiful! It was as if tears had washed her clean of a film, exposed a new depth of beauty. The words caught in my throat.

"Just before Dobler killed himself," she said, "I asked him what he thought time was. He'd been talking about it as a mathematical entity, but I had the idea he wasn't saying what he really felt, and I wanted to know everything he did . . . because I was afraid. It seemed something magical was happening, that I was being drawn into some incomprehensible scheme." She brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. "Dobler said that when he had begun to develop his equations, he'd had a feeling like mine. 'An apprehension of the mystical,' he called it. There was something hypnotic about the equations . . . they reminded him of mantras the way they affected him. The further his work progressed, the more he came to think of time—its event spectrum—as evidence of divinity. Its basic operation, its mechanics. Abimael laughed at this and asked if he was talking about God. And Dobler said that if by God he

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meant a stable energy system governing the actions of all matter on a sub-atomic level, then Yes, that's exactly what he was talking about."

I wanted to refute this, but it was so similar to my own thoughts concerning the nature of time, I could not muster a contrary word.

"You feel it, too," she said. "Don't you?"

I took her by the shoulders. "Let's leave here. Tonight. We can hire a boat to run us over to La Ceiba, and by tomorrow . . ."

She put a finger to my lips, then kissed me. The kiss deepened, and from that point on I lost track of what happened. One moment we were sitting on the floor of that skeleton house, and the next—our clothes magicked away—we were lying in the grass behind the house, in a tiny clearing bordered by banana trees. The way Ivie's hair was fanned out around her head, its color merging with the dark grass, she looked to be a pale female bloom sprouting from the sandy soil, and her skin felt like the moonlight, smooth, coated with a cool emulsion. I thought I could taste the moonlight on the tips of her breasts. She guided me between her legs, her expression grave, focused on the act, and as I entered her she arched her neck, staring up into the banana leaves, and cried, "Oh, God!" as if she saw there some enrapturing presence. But I knew to whom she was really crying out. To that sensation of heat and weakness that enveloped us, sheltered us. To that sublimation of hope and fear into a pour of pure desiring. To that strange thoughtless and self-adoring creature we became, all hip and mouth and heart. *That* was God.

Afterward as we dressed, among the sibilant noises and wind and sea, I heard a sharper noise, a click. But before I could categorize it, I put it from mind. My head was full of plans. I would knock Ivie out, drug her, carry her off to the States. I would allow the guerrillas to destroy the project, and at the last moment come swinging out of nowhere and snatch her to safety. I envisioned even more improbable heroics. Strong with love, all these plans seemed workable to me.

We walked around the side of the house, hand in hand, and I did not notice the figure standing in the shadow of a cashew tree until it spoke, saying, "Aymara!" Ivie gave a shriek of alarm, and I stepped in front of her, shielding her. The figure moved forward, and I saw it was Sotomayor, his sharp features set in a grim expression, his neatly trimmed beard looking fake in the moonlight. He stopped about six feet away, training a pistol on us, and fixed Ivie with a contemptuous stare. *"Puta!"* he said. He pulled something from his pocket and flung it at our feet. A folded piece of paper with writing on it. "You should be more discreet in your correspondence," he said to me.

"Listen . . ." I began.

He swung the pistol to cover my forehead. "You may have value as a

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hostage," he said. "But I wouldn't rely on that. I don't like being betrayed, and I'm not in the best of moods."

"I haven't betrayed you!" Ivie stepped from behind me. "You don't understand."

The muscles of Sotomayor's face worked, as if he were repressing a scream of rage.

"He's on our side," said Ivie. "You know that. He's always supported the cause."

Sotomayor smiled—a vicious, predator's smile—and leveled the pistol at her. "Did you enjoy your last fuck, bitch? I could hear you squealing down on the beach."

The muscles of his forearms bunched, preparing for the kick, and I dove for him. Too late. The pistol went off an instant before I knocked him over, the report blending with Ivie's cry, and we rolled in the grass and sand, clawing, grappling. Sotomayor was strong, but I was fighting out of sheer desperation, and he was no match for me. I tore the pistol from his grasp and brought the butt down on his temple. Brought it down a second time. He sagged, his head lolling. I crawled to where Ivie had fallen. Her legs were kicking in spasms, and when I touched her hair, I found it mired with blood. The bullet had entered through the side of her head and lodged in the brain. She must have been clinically dead already, but obeying some dumb reflex, she was trying to speak. Each time her mouth opened, blood jetted forth. She was bleeding from the eyes, the nostrils. Her entire face was slick with blood, and still her mouth kept opening and closing, making glutinous choking sounds. I wanted to touch her, to heal her with a touch, but there was so much broken, I could not decide where to lay my hands. They fluttered above her like stupid animals, and I heard myself screaming for it to stop, for her to stop. Her arms began to flop around, her hips to thrash, convulsing. A broken, bloody doll. I aimed the pistol at her chest, but could not bring myself to pull the trigger. Finally I covered her with my body, and, sobbing, held her until all movement ceased.

I came to my feet, staggered over to Sotomayor. He had not yet regained consciousness. Tears streaming down my cheeks, I pointed the pistol at him. But it did not seem sufficient that he merely die. I kneeled beside him, then straddled his chest.

A voice called out from behind me. "What goin' on dere, mon?"

Visible as shadows, two men were standing at the water's edge.

"Man killed somebody!" I answered.

"You call de police?"

"No!"

"Den I'll be goin' to de Key, ax 'em to spark up dere radio!"

I waved acknowledgment, watched the men sprint away. Once they

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were out of sight, I pried Sotomayor's mouth open and inserted the pistol barrel. "Wake up!" I shouted. I spat in his face, slapped him. Repeated the process. His eyelids twitched, and he let out a muffled groan. "Wake up, you son of a bitch!" He gazed at me blearily, and I wiggled the pistol to make him aware of it. His eyes widened. He tried to speak, his eyebrows arching comically with the effort. I cocked the pistol, and he froze.

"I should turn you in," I said. "Let the police torture your ass. But I don't trust you to be a hero, man. Maybe you'd talk. Maybe you know something worth trading for your life."

He gurgled something unintelligible.

"Can't hear you," I said. "Sorry."

Using the pistol as a lever, I began turning his head from side to side. He tried to keep his eyes on mine. Sweat popped out on his brow, and he was having trouble swallowing.

"Here it comes," I said.

He tensed and shut his eyes.

"Just kidding," I told him. I waited a few seconds, then shouted, "Here it comes!"

He flinched.

I started sobbing again. "Did you see what you did to her, man? Did you see? You fucking son of a bitch! Did you see!" The pistol was shaking, and Sotomayor bit the barrel to keep it still.

For a minute or thereabouts I was crying so hard, I was blinded. At last I managed to gain control. I wiped away the tears. "Here it comes," I said.

He blinked.

"Here it comes!"

Another blink.

"Here it fucking comes!"

His stare was mad and full of hate. But his hatred was nothing compared to mine. I was dizzy with it. The stars seemed very near, wheeling about my head. I wanted to sit astride him forever and cause him pain.

I dug the fingers of my left hand in back of his Adam's apple, forcing his jaws apart, and I battered his teeth with the barrel, breaking a couple. Blood filmed over his lower lip, trickled down into his beard. He gagged, choking on the fragments.

"Like that?" I asked him. "How about this?"

I broke his nose with the heel of my hand. Tears squeezed from his eyes, bloody saliva and mucous came from his nose. His breath made a sucking noise.

Shouts from the direction of St. Mark's Key.

I leaned close to Sotomayor, my face inches away, the blood-slimed barrel sheathed in his mouth.

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"Here it comes," I whispered. "Here. It. Comes."

I know he believed me, but he was mesmerized by my proximity, by whatever he saw in my eyes, and could not look away. I screamed at him and met his terrified gaze as I fired.

Perhaps I would have been charged with murder in the States, but in Honduras, where politics and passion license all manner of violence, I was a hero.

I was a hero, and insane . . . for grief possessed me as powerfully as had love.

Now that Ivie was dead, it seemed only just that the others join her on the pyre. I told the police everything I knew. The island was sealed off, the guerrillas rounded up. The press acclaimed me; the President of the United States called to commend my actions; my fellow journalists beseiged the Hotel Captain Henry, seeking to interview me but usually settling for interviews with the cleaning woman and the owner. I was in no mood to play the hero. I drank, I wept, I wandered. I gazed into nowhere, seeing Ivie's face. Aymara's face. In memoriam, I accorded her that name. Brave-sounding and lyrical, it suited her. And I wished she could have died wearing that name in 1902—that, I realized, should have been her destiny. Whenever I saw a dark-haired young woman, I would have the urge to follow her, to spy on her, to discover who her friends were, what made her laugh, what movies she liked, how she made love, thinking that knowing these details would help me regain the definition that Aymara had brought to my life. Yet even had this not been a fantasy, I could not have acted upon it. Grief had immobilized me. Grief . . . and guilt. It had been my meddling that had precipitated her death, hadn't it? I was a dummy moving on a track between these two emotions, stopping now and again to stare at something that had caught my eye, some curiosity that would for a moment reduce my self-awareness.

Several days after her death, the regional director of the CIA paid me a call. My visit to Project Longshot had originally been scheduled for two weeks prior to the initial test, but he now told me that since I knew about "our little secret down here," the President had authorized my presence at the test. This exclusive was to be my reward for patriotism. I accepted his invitation and came close to telling him that I would be delighted to stand at ground zero during the end of the world.

I had been too self-absorbed to give much thought to Dobler's warnings, but now I decided I wanted the world to end. What was the point in trying to save it? We had been heading toward destruction for years, and as far as I was concerned the time was ripe. A few days before I might have raised a mighty protest against the project, but my political conscience—and perhaps my moral one—had died with Aymara, and I was

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angry at the world, at its hollow promise and mock virtues and fallacious judgments. Anger made my grief more endurable, and I nourished it, picturing it to be a tiny golden snake with ruby eyes. A familiar. It would feed on tears, transform them into venom. It would be my secret, coiled and ready to strike. It would fit perfectly inside my heart.

On the day prior to the test, I was flown by small plane to a military base on the mainland, and from there by helicopter to the project site, passing over the valley in which lay the ruined city of Olancho Viejo, with its creeper-hung cathedral tower sticking up like an eroded green fang. Three buildings of white concrete crowned a massive jungled hill overlooking the valley, and on the hillside facing away from the valley were other buildings—living quarters and storage rooms and sentry posts. The administrator, a middle-aged balding man named Morrel, briefed me on the test; but I cut this short, informing him that I had heard most of what he was telling me from Dobler. His only reaction was to cluck his tongue and say, "Poor fellow."

Afterward, Morrel led me downhill to the commissary and introduced me to the rest of the personnel. Ostensibly this was a joint US-Honduran project, but there were only two Hondurans among the twenty-eight scientists—an elderly man clearly past his prime, and a dark-haired young woman who tried to duck out the door when I approached. Morrel urged her forward and said, "Mister Corson, this is *Senorita* Aymara Luján."

I was nearly too stunned to accept her handshake. She refused to meet my eyes, and her hand was trembling. I could not believe that this was mere coincidence. Though to my mind she was not as lovely as my Aymara, she was undeniably beautiful and of a type with my dead love. Slim and large-eyed, her features displaying more than a trace of Indian blood. I had a mental image of a long line of beautiful dark-haired women stretching across the country, each prepared to step forward should an accident befall her sisters.

"I'm pleased to meet you," this one said. "I've always admired your work." She glanced around in apparent alarm as if she had said something indiscreet; then, recovering her poise, she added, "Perhaps we'll have a chance to talk at dinner."

She placed an unnatural stress on these last words, making it plain that this was a message sent. "I'd like that," I said.

For the remainder of the day I was shown a variety of equipment and instrumentation to which I paid little attention. The appearance of this new Aymara undermined my anger somewhat, and Dobler's thesis concerning the inalterability of time, its capacity to compensate for change, seemed to embody the menace of prophecy. But I made no move to reveal what I suspected. This development had brought my insanity to a peak,

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and I was gripped by a fatalistic malaise. Who the hell was I to trifle with fate, I reasoned. And besides, it was unlikely that any action I took would have an effect. Maybe it *was* coincidence. I retreated from the problem into an almost puritanical stance, as if dealing with the matter was somehow vile, beneath me, and when the dinner hour arrived, deciding it would be best to avoid the woman, I pled weariness and retired to my quarters.

My room was a white cubicle furnished with a bed, a desk and chair, and a word processor. The window provided a view of the jungle that swept away toward Nicaragua, and I sat by it, watching sunset resolve into a slate-colored dusk, and then into a darkness figured by stars and a half-moon. With no one about to engage my interest, grief closed in around me.

A few minutes after eight o'clock, small arms fire began to crackle on the hilltop. I went to the door and peered out. Muzzle flashes were probing the darkness higher up. I had an impulse to run, but my inertia prevailed and I went back to the chair. Soon thereafter, the door opened and the woman who called herself Aymara entered. She wore a white project jumpsuit that glowed in the moonlight, and she carried an automatic rifle, which she kept at the ready but aimed at a point to my right.

Neither of us spoke for several seconds, and then I said, "What's going on?" and laughed at the banal tone that comment struck.

Another burst of fire from above.

"It's almost over," she said.

I allowed several more seconds to elapse before saying, "How did you pull it off? Security looked pretty tight."

"Most of them died at dinner." She tossed her head, shaking hair from her eyes. "Poison."

"Oh." Again I laughed. "Sorry I couldn't make it."

"I didn't want to kill you," she said with urgency. "You've . . . been a friend to my country. But after what you did on Guanoja . . ."

"What I did there was execute a murderer! An animal!"

She studied me a moment. "I believe you. Sotomayor was an evil man."

"Evil!" I made a disparaging noise. "And what force for good do you represent? The EDP? The FDLM?"

"We acted independently . . . I and a few friends."

Silence, then a single gunshot.

"Is that really your name?" I asked. "Aymara?"

She nodded. "I've often wondered how much influence your article has had on me. On everything. Because of it, I've always felt I was involved in . . ."

"Something mystical, right? Magical. I know all about it."

"How could you?"

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"How could I have written the article in the first place? I don't have any answers." I turned back to the window. "I suppose you're going to try to contact Christmas."

"I don't have a choice," she said defiantly. "I feel . . ."

"Believe me," I cut in. "I understand why. When did you decide to do this?"

"I'd been considering it for some time, but I wasn't sure. Then the news came about Sotomayor . . ."

"Jesus God!" I leaned forward, burying my face in my hands.

"What's wrong?"

"Get out!" I said. "Kill me, do whatever you have to . . . just get out of here."

"I'm not going to kill you."

I sensed her moving close, and through my fingers saw her lay some papers on the desk.

"I'm giving you a map," she said. "At the foot of the hill, next to the sentry post, there's a trail leading east. It's well-traveled, and even in the dark it won't be difficult to follow. Less than a day's walk from here, you'll come to a river. You'll find villages. Boats that'll take you to the coast."

I said nothing.

"We won't be able to go operational until dawn," she went on. "You have about ten hours. Things might not be so bad once you're out of the immediate area."

"Go away," I told her.

"I . . ." She faltered. "I think we . . ."

"What the hell do you want from me?" Angry, I spun around. But on seeing her, my anger evaporated. The moonlight seemed to have erased all distinction between her and my Aymara—she might have been my lover reborn, her spirit returned. "What do you want?" I said weakly.

"I don't know. But I do want something from you. For so long I've felt we were linked. Involved." She reached out as if to touch me, then jerked back her hand. "I don't know. Maybe I just want your blessing."

I could smell her scent of soap and perfume, sharp and clean in that musty little room, and I felt a stirring of sexual attraction. In my mind's eye I saw again that endless line of dark-haired women, and I suddenly believed that love was the scheme that had enforced our intricate union, that—truly or potentially—we were all lovers, I and a thousand Aymaras, all tuned to the same mystical pitch. I got to my feet, rested my hands on her hips. Pulled her close. Her lips grazed my cheek as she settled into the embrace. Her heart beat rapidly against my chest. Then she drew back, her face tilted up to receive a kiss. I tasted her mouth, and her warmth spread through me, melting the cold partition I had

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erected between myself and life. At last she pushed me away and—averting her eyes—walked to the door.

"Goodbye." She said it in Spanish—"*Adios*"—a word that translates literally as "to God."

I heard her footsteps running up the hill.

I was tempted to go after her, and to resist this temptation, not to save myself, I took her map and set out walking the trail east. Yet as I went, my desire to survive grew stronger, and I increased my pace, beating my way through thickets and plaited vines, stumbling down rocky defiles. Had I been alone in the jungle at any other time, I would have been terrified, for the night sounds were ominous, the shadows eerie; but all my fear was focused upon those white buildings on the hilltop, and I paid no mind to the threat of jaguars and snakes. Toward dawn, I stopped in a weedy clearing bordered by ceibas and giant figs, their crowns towering high above the rest of the canopy. I was bruised, covered with scratches, exhausted, and I saw no reason to continue. I sat down, my back propped against a ceiba trunk, and watched the sky fading to gray.

I had thought brightness would fan across the heavens as with the detonation of a nuclear bomb, but this was not the case. I felt a disturbance in the air, a vibration, and then it was as if everything—trees, the earth, even my own flesh—were yielding up some brilliant white essence, blinding yet gradually growing less intense, until it seemed I was in the midst of a thick white fog through which I could just make out the phantom shapes of the jungle. Accompanying the whiteness was a bone-chilling cold; this, however, dissipated quickly, whereas it turned out that the fog lingered for hours, dwindling to a fine haze before at last becoming imperceptible. At first I was full of dread, anticipating death in one form or another; but soon I began to experience a perverse disappointment. The world had suffered a cold flash, a spot of vagueness, like the symptoms of a mild fever, and the idea that my lover had died for this made me more heartsick than ever.

I waited the better part of an hour for death to take me. Then, disconsolate, thinking I might as well push on, I glanced at my watch to estimate how much farther I had to travel, and found that not only had it stopped but that it could not be rewound. Curious, I thought. As I brushed against a bush at the edge of the clearing, its leaves crumbled to dust; its twigs remained intact, but when I snapped one off, a greenish fluid welled from the cortex. I tasted it, and within seconds I felt a burst of energy and well-being. Continuing on, I observed other changes. An intricate spiderweb whose strands I could not break, though I exerted all my strength; a whirling column of dust and light that looked to be emanating from the site of the project; and in the reflecting waters of a

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pond I discovered that my hair had gone pure white. Perhaps the most profound change was in the atmosphere of the jungle. Birds twittered, monkeys screeched. All as usual. Yet I sensed a vibrancy, a vitality, that had not been in evidence before.

By the time I reached the river, the fog had cleared. I walked along the bank for half an hour and came to a village of thatched huts, a miserable place littered with feces and mango rinds, hemmed in by brush and stands of bamboo. It appeared deserted, but moored to the bank, floating in the murky water, was a dilapidated boat that—except for the fact it was painted bright blue, decorated with crosses and bearded, haloed faces—might have been the twin of the scow in *The African Queen*. As I drew near, a man popped out of the cabin and waved. An old, old man wearing a gray robe. His hair was white and ragged, his face tanned and wrinkled, and his eyes showed as blue as the painted hull.

"Praise the Lord!" he yelled. "Where the hell you been?"

I glanced behind me to make sure he was not talking to someone else. "Hey," I said. "Where is everybody?"

"Gone. Fled. Scared to death, they were. But now they'll believe me, won't they?" He beckoned impatiently. "Hurry up! You think I got all day. Souls are wastin' for want of Jerome's good news." He tapped his chest. "That's me. Jerome."

I introduced myself.

Again he signaled his impatience. "Got all eternity to learn your name. Let's get a move on." He leaned on the railing, squinting at me. "You're the one sent, ain'tcha?"

"I don't think so."

" 'Course you are!" He clasped his hands prayerfully. "And, lo, I fell asleep in the white light of the Rapture and the Lord spake, sayin', 'Jerome, there will come a man of dour countenance bearin' My holy sign, and he will aid your toil and lend ballast to your joy.' Well, here you are, and here I am, and if that hair of your'n ain't a sign, I don't know what is. Come on!" He patted the railing. "Help me push 'er out into the current."

"Why don't you use the engine?"

"It don't work." He cackled, delighted. "Nothin' works. Not the radio, not the generator. None of the Devil's tools. Ain't it wonderful?" He scowled. "Now come on! That's enough talk. You gonna aid my toil or not?"

"Where are you headed?"

"Down the Fundamental Stream to the Source and back again. Ain't no other place to go now the Lord is come."

"To the coast?" I insisted, not in the least taken with this looney.

"Yeah, yeah!" Jerome put his hands on his hips and regarded me with

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displeasure. "You gotta lighten up some, boy. Don't know as I'm gonna be needin' all this much ballast to my joy."

I have been a month on the river with Jerome, and I expect I will remain with him a while longer, for I have no desire to return to civilization until its breakdown is complete—the world, it seems, has ended, though not in the manner I would have thought. I am convinced Jerome is crazy, the victim of long solitudes and an overdose of religious tracts; yet he has no doubt I am the crazy one, and who is to say which of us is right. At every village we stop to allow him to proclaim the Rapture, the advent of the Age of Miracles . . . and, indeed, miracles abound. I have seen a mestizo boy call fish into his net by playing a flute; I have witnessed healings performed by a matronly Indian woman; I have watched an old German expatriate set fires with his stare. As for myself, I have acquired the gift of clairvoyance, which has permitted me to see something of the world that is aborning. Jerome attributes all this to an increase in the wattage of the Holy Spirit; whereas I believe that Project Longshot caused a waning of certain principles—especially those pertaining to anything mechanical or electrical—and a waxing of certain others—in particular those applying to ESP and related phenomena. The two ideas are not opposed. I can easily imagine some long-dead psychic perceiving a whiteness at the end of time and assigning it Godlike significance. Yet I have no faith that a messiah will appear. It strikes me that this new world holds greater promise than the old (though perhaps the old world merely milked its promise dry), a stronger hope of survival, and a wider spectrum of possibility; but God, to my way of thinking, darts among the quarks and neutrinos, an eternal signal harrying them to order, a resource capable of being tapped by magic or by science, and it may be that love is both the seminal impulse of this signal and the ultimate distillation of this resource.

We argue these matters constantly, Jerome and I, to pass green nights along the river. But upon one point we agree. All arguments lapse before the mystery and coincidence of our lives. All systems fail, all logics prove to zero.

So, Aymara, we have worked our spell, you and I and time. Now I must seek my own salvation. Jerome tells me time heals all wounds, but can it—I wonder—heal a wound that it has caused. Though we had only a few weeks, they were the central moments of my life, and their tragic culmination, the sudden elimination of their virtues, has left me irresolute and weak. The freshness and optimism of the world has made your loss more poignant, and I am not ashamed to admit that—like the most cliched of grievers—I see your face in clouds, hear your voice in the articulations of the wind, and feel your warmth in the shafts of light

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piercing the canopy. Often I feel that I am breaking inside, that my heart is turning in my chest like a haywire compass, trying to fix upon some familiar pole and detecting none, and I know I will never be done with weeping.

Buck up, Jerome tells me. You can't live in the past, you gotta look to the future and be strong.

I reply that I am far less at home in the fabulous present than I am in the past. As to the future, well . . . I have envisioned myself walking the high country, a place of mountains and rivers without end, of snow fields and temples with bronze doors, and I sense I am searching for something. Could it be you, Aymara? Could that white ray of science pouring from the magical green hill have somewhere resurrected you or your likeness? Perhaps I will someday find the strength to leave the river and find answers to these questions; perhaps finding that strength is an answer in itself. That hope alone sustains me. For without you, Aymara, even among miracles I am forlorn. ●

A STARPILOT MUSES ON THE UNIVERSAL TIDAL POOL

She's torched the lightships to every beach,
every hidden cove of relativity,
where spinning arm over arm over arm
galaxies creep along
heavy as starfish on the prowl.
With protozoan velocity,
interstellar dust darts from the mouths
of suns into the flickering
crustacean mouths of quasars.
Black holes reside dumb
and unmoving as urchins.
Yet of all the heavenly denizens,
she finds novae most spectacular,
the most like her.
As the pool expands around her ship,
far off in a shadow's lee
one flares ghostly as an anemone.

—Robert Frazier

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Tuf Voyaging
By George R.R. Martin
Baen, $15.95

What's so much fun as a good treasure hunt? And treasure hunts, by coincidence, seem to be the theme-of-the-month.

Take George R.R. Martin's most recent "novel," *Tuf Voyaging*, for instance. (I put "novel" in quotes because it's one of those books for which there is still no one-word description made up of several linked stories, in this case initially published in that other magazine —oh what's its name?—oh, yes, *Analog*.) It starts out with a treasure hunt, a group of various shady characters out to find the richest artifact in the known Galaxy. What is it? An intact ship from the interstellar wars of a millennium ago, a "seedship" of the Earth Ecological Corps with intact, clonable strains of thousands of life forms, some benign, some anything but (including some very nasty plague viruses).

These various lowlife types hire the ship of a two-bit trader named Haviland Tuf, who is pasty, fat, bald, aelurophilic to the point of mania (cats play a big part in this story), and honest to the point of utter deviousness. He is reminiscent, in his formal speech and inscrutable cleverness, of the old cliché of the sagacious, probably mythical, Chinese ancient, who was always a sure-fire character.

Needless to say, Tuf ends up with the prize as the rest of the party meet their ends in various unpleasant and surprising ways on the enormous seedship. But here we have the satisfaction of finding out what the winner *does* with the prize, as we watch Tuf set out into the Galaxy to be a free-lance ecological engineer. And what he does with his horde (and hoard) of life forms is consistently amusing.

One watery world is suddenly beset with an ongoing rash of sea (and air and land) monsters; Tuf's answer is to develop a telepathic kitten (huh?). Then there is the unpleasant culture built around the sport of animal fights to the death—Tuf takes care of *that* like a one-man ASPCA. But he keeps coming back to the civilized but *very* overpopulated world of S'uthlam, whose problem is terrifyingly simple: too many people and a population that keeps growing.

This is a new facet of Martin's manysided talent. It's quite a jump from the vampiric hothouse of *Fevre*

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Dream and the hip *Armageddon Rag* to *Tuf Voyaging*, which is classic SF in the *Astounding/Analog* vein: an eccentrically clever protagonist, scientific problems set and solved, and a trip tooling round the Galaxy encountering believably whacko characters and societies. There's even the sneaky Social Significance, and in this case, I couldn't be more for it. The mad culture of S'uthlam, constantly breeding for religious reasons despite a disaster point that keeps getting closer and closer, is a thinly disguised portrait of the very planet you're sitting on at the moment, and the more people that take Martin's cogent point, the better.

Saturnalia
By Grant Callin
Baen, $2.95 (paper)

Then there's Grant Callin's first novel, *Saturnalia*, which is nothing but one long treasure hunt, laid out in the classic sense. First you find clue A, which leads you to clue B, and so on, eventually winding you up where the treasure is buried. Trouble with *this* treasure is that it's "buried" somewhere down in that mess that passes for atmosphere on the planet Saturn.

And who sets out to find it? Would you believe a mild-mannered teacher of archeology named Kurious Whitedimple. Don't ask—as someone points out eventually, he'll spend hours explaining his name with outrageous prevarications. This, however, is Whitey's only real eccentricity until he is drafted by circumstances to go out to the Saturnian moon, Iapetus, where the first alien artifact has been found.

Why him? Because he's the only available scholar on SpaceHome, the orbiting industrial/residential satellite city of Earth, that has any real experience at translating unknown languages (his dissertation research was pre-Etruscan artifacts down on Earth). And SpaceHome, which has become semi-autonomous, wants any benefits that might accrue from the discovery before the powers-that-be on Earth can get at it.

So you get the setup: the frenzied solving of clues, the Earth-SpaceHome intrigue in the race for the treasure, the technical problems inherent in getting the damned thing, and the development of the stay-at-home scholar with no knowledge of the hard sciences whatever into a rocket-jockey, space-roving, outward-ho! techie who wins the day. (He keeps nattering on about [figuratively] developing hair on his chest, an unfortunate and rather old-fashioned implication that masculinity and scholarship don't equate.)

Any new high-tech SF writer is welcome these days, since the demand seems to be outstripping the supply. Callin definitely falls into that category, and on the whole, *Saturnalia* (silly title) shows a lot of promise that he could help fill the void. He hasn't quite yet managed the smooth integration of tech talk and narrative that the best of

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the breed (Clarke, Niven, et. al.) have mastered, in which even the most ignorant of nontechnological types can get excited over the whiz-bang solution to a problem (this being one of the most basic excitements of SF when it works, very akin to the satisfaction gained from a brilliant detective story solution). There's also the problem of visual description; SpaceHome, for instance, is a very complicated contraption of six-going-on-seven connected satellites consisting of upper case Hubs, lower case hubs, tortuous toruses (tori?), and other such esoterica which it is the author's duty to help the reader visualize. Callin makes a valiant try, but at least one reader got lost out on the spokes somewhere. The complicated Saturn system is an even greater challenge.

The reader whose high is high tech, however, will eat it up.

Interstellar Pig

By William Sleator

Bantam, $2.95 (paper)

The third treasure hunt of the month is found in the area of juvenile and YA (young adult) SF, which slightly overlaps that which is published as adult (though not necessarily *being* adult) but is in reality a whole different ballgame. William Sleator made an impression with his YA novel, *The Green Futures of Tycho;* his latest, *Interstellar Pig,* doesn't have quite such an inspired premise, but can still be read without embarrassment even by those who consider themselves OAs (old adults).

Young Barney's parents have rented an old house once belonging to a sea captain for a summer holiday. Barney, being redheaded and not fond of the sun, is bored out of his skull. He hears stories of the history of the house, that the captain had kept his mad brother locked in the room that is now Barney's, and that the scratch marks around the window were supposedly made by the lunatic. The brother was supposed to have gone mad at sea, killing a castaway whom they had picked up, and swearing that the castaway was the Devil, an evil being like a green reptile. And he refused to give up an amulet stolen from the murdered "man." Barney notices that the scratches all seem to center at one point in the window, and that point is opposite a boulder on a small, offshore island.

Then there are the new neighbors, another holiday party consisting of a beautiful young woman and two equally handsome young men. They make a point of getting to know Barney, and sweep him into a board game they play obsessively, in which alien beings with various attributes move around the Galaxy in search of an artifact called "the Piggy," represented by a card with a singularly nasty drawing of a pig-like creature on it. The home planets of the players who do not have the Piggy at the end of the game are destroyed.

Barney goes treasure hunting on

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the offshore island; what he finds under the boulder is an amulet, an exact replica of the Piggy. Things get pretty complicated, but in the climax Barney finds himself in the kitchen of his deserted house battling an archnoid nymph from Vavoosh, carniverous lichen from Mbridlengile, a water-breathing gill man from Thrilb, and a flying octopus from Flaeioub for the Piggy—and the Earth just may be destroyed in fifteen minutes.

It's one of those stories about which you keep muttering, "This is absolutely ridiculous" as you read. *But*—you keep reading.

The John W. Campbell Letters, Vol. 1
Edited by Perry A. Chapdelaine, Tony Chapdelaine & George Hay
AC Projects (Rt. 4, Box 137, Franklin TN 37064), $5.95 (paper)

"What's a John W. Campbell, Jr., Uncle Baird?"

"Well, Fannie, my dear nitwitted niece, there was once a kind of story called science fiction. And in the early part of this very century which will soon be late, and in this very country (which may soon be late), it all appeared in magazines. And almost all of it was about this scientist, who was sometimes batty and bad, and sometimes vague but good. He usually had a helpless-but-beautiful daughter with blonde wavy hair (probably permed). Then he'd invent something—a ray or a rocket or something—which would place the daughter into the slimy tentacles of a terrible monster who lived on Pluto or Betelguese or one of those places, and who would then carry her off. A young engineer would appear from nowhere and save her scientifically by bashing the monster with a socket wrench. That's why it was called science fiction. Scientifiction was also a popular term."

"That sounds like fun, Uncle Baird. It's like all my books, but in them the scientist is a wizard, and the monster is a goblin, and the socket wrench is a magic sword. But what has that got to do with John W. Etc.?"

"Well, my dear modern little ignoramus, people got tired of all that after a while. For one thing, they couldn't figure out why the monster was carrying off the blonde, since their anatomies were incompatible."

"You mean, dear Uncle, that they couldn't . . ."

"No, my punkish infant, they couldn't dot dot dot. In any case, a very smart young writer became editor of a magazine called *Astounding Stories of Super-Science* and he decided that the old kind of story was pretty silly, and that there should be a new kind of science fiction, so he made up some editorial rules such as the science part should be valid scientific speculation with at least one foot in reality, and that the plot should grow out of the science fictional elements and not just be a transplanted Western. And then he found all sorts of wonderful writers with names like van Vogt and del Rey

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and de Camp and even some with only one part names like Heinlein and Asimov and Williamson who liked his rules, and they all made a Golden Age, and the magazine grew up to be called—er, what *is* its name now—oh, yes, *Analog*, and science fiction lived happily ever after. And that editor's name was John W. Campbell, Jr."

"Why haven't I ever heard of him before, Uncle Baird?"

"Because you do nothing but read mindless fantasies and science fiction movie novelizations, and have no interest in the history of the field and the great names that made science fiction and fantasy what they are." (He picks her up and drops her over the edge of the thirtieth-floor terrace.)

I'm afraid that, like my niece (no relation, really; just a neighbor's child), too few modern readers have any idea of who John W. Campbell was, and how he practically remade an entire field singlehandedly (as well as almost creating modern fantasy in *Unknown Magazine)*, with a little help from his friends.

But for those who do know and care—or want to know and care—about Campbell's influential and sometimes controversial career, the publication of Volume 1 of *The John W. Campbell Letters* is a major event. One doesn't *review* this kind of book, one just notes its publication, its importance, and that the letters are to (among many others): van Vogt, Eric Frank Russell, L. Ron Hubbard, Poul Anderson, Asimov, Henry Kuttner, Hannes Bok, E.E. Smith, H. Beam Piper, Willy Ley, Heinlein, and James Tiptree, Jr.

Needless to say one learns a lot about authors, editors, and history. It should be required reading for all would-be editors (do people really *want* to be editors?), and there are probably some now-are editors that could benefit, too.

The Yellow Knight of Oz; Pirates in Oz; The Purple Prince of Oz
By Ruth Plumly Thompson
Del Rey, $5.95 each (paper)

It's about time to acknowledge the republication of the Thompson Oz books, which is a major service to almost all fantasy aficionados. For the non-*cognoscenti*, who may think *The Wizard of Oz* a solo phenomenon, L. Frank Baum wrote fourteen books about Oz; at his death, a lady named Ruth Plumly Thompson continued the series by another thirteen (and there were several more by various hands after that).

Now up to about ten years ago, there was not the plethora of fantasy that we enjoy (?) today. Well, in the 1960s, satisfying book-length fantasies were hard to come by; there were only a handful for adults, and not *that* many more for kids. Which is why you'll find that almost every fantasy addict over a certain age grew up on the Oz books. Oz was not the first fantasy kingdom/world, but it was probably the first to have a consistent geography and history, constantly

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enlarged and given further detail by additional books. (The first Burroughs Mars novel appeared twelve years after *The Wizard.*)

The Thompson Oz books have never before been in paperback, and all of them, in fact, have been out of print for a good many years. So their reappearance is a nostalgic joy for old Oz hands, and a feast of discovery for those who may have known the Baum stories and now have many more Ozite chronicles to explore.

Thompson's stories have a distinctly different flavor from Baum's; dare one say more feminine? There was always a dark undercurrent of violence and meanness to Baum's work. His villains were distinctly unpleasant; the child protagonists were forthright to the point of rudeness (something of a shock if one knows the polite children of English turn-of-the-century fantasies). Thompson is much lighter and jokier; her villains are comic rather than malefic and her books abound in puns and wordplay, making them very much the ancestors of today's light fantasies, and probably more to the taste of today's audiences.

They are being reprinted several at a time in paperback; the latest batch consists of *The Yellow Knight of Oz, Pirates in Oz,* and *The Purple Prince of Oz* (numbers 24, 25, and 26, respectively).

The Yellow Knight is certainly one of the most charming of all. He is Sir Hocus of Pokes, who picked up Dorothy in the course of an earlier adventure and was given residence in Ozma's palace. A gentle, middle-aged knight, he knows he's been under a spell but can't quite remember why or what. So he suddenly decides to go on a quest, to "save a maiden, serve a monarch, and destroy a monster." He heads east into the Winkie country; his first adventure is the avoidance of marriage with one-eyed Queen Marcia of Marshland; her subjects are called Stick-In-the Muds, her army consists of Mud Guards, and she lives on marshmallows. (Word play? What word play?)

He then runs into Speedy, a boy from the U.S. who has been transported to Oz by a malfunctioning rocket ship built by his uncle. The two team up and have a series of utterly absurd adventures, which result in Sir Hocus finding the mystery of his origins, not to mention saving a maiden, etc. Speedy is returned home by Ozma, though more often than not the Americans stay in Oz and there is quite an expatriate colony there, headed, of course, by Dorothy.

The title of *Pirates in Oz* says it all, though much of the action takes place outside of Oz across the Deadly Desert on the neighboring Nonestic Ocean, and Captain Samuel Salt and his crew are hardly bloodthirsty types. *The Purple Prince of Oz* is Randywell Handywell Brandenburg Bompadoo, Prince of the Purple Mountains, which are, of course, in the Gillikin Country (the four major divisions of Oz are color-keyed, as it were;

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purple is the color of the Gillikin Country, the least known of the four). His father is retiring to become a hermit, and Randy must set out incognito to fulfill seven conditions to prove he's fit to be king. He does, of course, with the unlikely help of an elegant elephant, a little giant, a Red Jinn who comes encased in his red glass bottle like a turtle in a shell, and the Wizard of Oz, himself, who has gone beyond being a humbug.

It's all total nonsense, but it's endlessly inventive and diverting. The Oz books are like salted peanuts, so you'd better have several on hand.

Quest of the Three Worlds
By Cordwainer Smith
Del Rey, $2.95 (paper)

In a recent conversation with Ursula K. Le Guin, she affirmed something that she has said before. "It was Cordwainer Smith who showed me what you could really do with this medium" (this medium being science fiction), and she went on to say that it was reading her first Cordwainer Smith stories that led her to submit to a science fiction magazine.

If that were all we had to thank Cordwainer Smith for, it would be a lot, but he was not only a great influence on many writers. He also left a legacy of work that should continue to influence generations to come, though it is small in comparison to that of more prolific authors. Trouble is that almost all of it has been unavailable for years. Last year it was a pleasure to note three of his books reprinted at once, and now there's another important one available again. It is *Quest of the Three Worlds.*

Smith was in reality Paul Linebarger, whose extraordinary career outside writing SF included many years in the U.S. Army Intelligence Service. He died in 1966. *Quest of the Three Worlds* is outré even for Smith's outré ouevre. It starts out indeed as a quest; Casher O'Neill, the nephew and heir of the ousted ruler of Mizzer, the sand planet, is seeking aid through the inhabited worlds of the Instrumentality to regain Mizzer from the Colonel who has taken over. On the jewel planet, there's the matter of a horse, the only one they've ever seen. On Henriada, the storm planet, a drive of a few miles is a hazardous and hair-raising adventure thanks to constant cyclones (the cars have devices to bolt themselves to the road), not to mention the mutated air-whales and the primitive humans who live on (that's *on*) the wind. It's on Henriada that Casher finds powers to accomplish his purpose; typical of Smith, he does so in a curious and premature anticlimax and the story goes on from there.

This takes place in Smith's universe of the Instrumentality, the myriad details of which are too many to go into here. However, one must mention the Underpeople, servants created from various animal species of Old Earth, which make up much of the Dickensian

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cast of characters. And one hesitates to bring up the matter of poetics and philosophy for fear of frightening off potential readers in a time when mindlessness is *in*. But if you haven't read Cordwainer Smith, and want something a little demanding and a lot imaginative, well . . . (If you *really* want a challenge, you can try and find the anagrammatic references to the Kennedy-Oswald assassinations which are said to be there.)

Shoptalk . . . Samuel R. Delany fans will be interested in a new collection of *The Complete Nebula Award-Winning Fiction*, which includes the three short works that won Nebulas plus the novel *Empire Star* (Bantam, $4.95, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ●

NEXT ISSUE:

Multiple award-winner George R.R. Martin returns to *IAsfm* next month with our September cover story, "The Glass Flower." Martin's last story for us, "Portraits of His Children," was a finalist for both the Nebula and Hugo Awards this year. In "The Glass Flower," another major piece of work, Martin takes us centuries into the future and far across the Galaxy, to a strange planet whose stranger inhabitants play at the strangest game of all—a treacherous and supremely dangerous game of imagination and illusion, whose stakes are immortality . . . and identity itself. World Fantasy Award-winner Kim Stanley Robinson is also aboard for our September issue. His razzle-dazzle novella, "Escape From Kathmandu," is a *bit* more down-to-earth in locale than Martin's—the ancient city of Kathmandu, in Nepal, in the shadow of the Himalayas—but features a cast of characters equally as exotic; wild and wooly and very funny, this one is something of a departure for Robinson, and one you won't want to miss.

Also in September: Nancy Kress takes us "Down Behind Cuba Lake" for a terrifying treatment of the old quip about how You Can't Get There from Here; Andrew Weiner gives us "The News From D Street"; Avram Davidson takes us to the Neolithic for a wry and offbeat tour of a "Landscape With Giant Bison"; Bill Crenshaw, in his *IAsfm* debut, spins an enthralling tale of a hunter hot on the trail of some very big (and very odd) game, in "Leviathan"; and in "Without Belief," Sally Damowsky makes *her IAsfm* debut with a kind of story you don't see every day: a Homeric murder mystery, with Odysseus himself thrust into the role of detective. Plus our usual columns and features. Look for the September issue on your newsstands on July 29, or subscribe and be sure to miss none of our upcoming issues.

Coming up: big new stories by Connie Willis, Frederik Pohl, Kate Wilhelm, Lucius Shepard, Harlan Ellison, Ian Watson, Harry Turtledove, Isaac Asimov, Jack McDevitt, Lewis Shiner, Cherry Wilder, and others.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Join WorldCon in Atlanta right now for $65, and avoid the at-the-door increase. Also, many important overseas cons are coming up. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria, VA 22304. (703) 823-3117 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. It's polite to send an SASE when writing cons. Look for me at cons behind the iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge, with a musical keyboard.

JULY, 1986

3-6—**WesterCon.** For info. write: **Box 81285, San Diego, CA 92138.** Or phone: **(703) 823-3117** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: San Diego CA (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: David ("Sundiver") Brin, Greg Bear, fan Karen Turner. Masquerade. The 39th annual edition of the big, traveling Western con. At the Town and Country Hotel.

4-6—**ConZineience.** Holiday Inn North, Irving TX. (near DFW airport). Media oriented, but fannish.

11-13—**NYClone.** Hyatt Hotel, New Brunwick, NJ (near New York City). Alexis (Rosinante) Gilliland.

11-13—**MapleCon, Box 3156, Station D, Ottawa ON K1P 6H7.** Stephen R. Donaldson. Masquerade.

18-20—**OKon, Box 4229, Tulsa, OK 74159.** No more news on this long-time Southern Plains con yet.

25-27—**Fantasy Fair, Box 566, Marietta GA 30061. (404) 662-6850.** Atlanta GA. Mostly comics and media, and expensive ($29), but provides a chance to check out the site of WorldCon a month later.

AUGUST, 1986

8-11—**MythCon, c/o Lowentrout, MacIntosh 618, CSU, Long Beach CA 90840.** C. deLint. The Mythopoeic Society's 17th annual High Fantasy con (Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams). Celebrating Williams' centennial. Theme: "Daughters of Beatrice: Women in Fantasy." Papers called for.

23-24—**Japanese National SF Con, 201 Chanpier AWAZA, 1-6-8 Enokojima, Nishi, Osaka 550, Japan.** At the Suita-shi-Bunka-Kaikan (May Theatre). The 25th annual, the 5th called Daicon. 3000 expected.

28–Sept. 1—**ConFederation, 3277 Roswell Rd. #1986, Atlanta GA 30305.** Bradbury, fan/editor Terry Carr, Bob (Slow Glass) Shaw. The WorldCon for 1986. Join before July 15 for $65; more at the door.

SEPTEMBER, 1986

4-7—**CopperCon, Box 11743, Phoenix AZ 85061. (602) 968-5673 or 968-7790.** Laid-back "relax-a-con."

6-9—**French National Con, 34 rue de la Clef, Lille 59800, France.** 13th annual. 100 to 200 people.

19-21—**MosCon, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843.** Artist Michael Goodwin, Dean Ing, astronomer R. Quigley.

26-28—**DeepSouthCon, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40258.** David Hartwell, S. Sucharitkul, artist Alex Schomburg, fan Ann Layman Chancellor. 24th annual Southern con. Masquerade, Hearts championship.

AUGUST, 1987

27-Sep. 2—**ConSpiracy, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** Brighton, England. WorldCon '87.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

5-8—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282. Phoenix, AZ.** NASFiC 1987, held since WorldCon's abroad.

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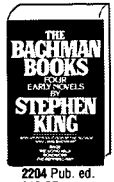

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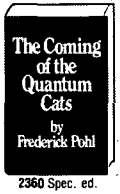

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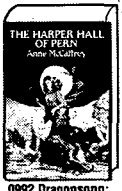

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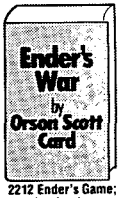

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